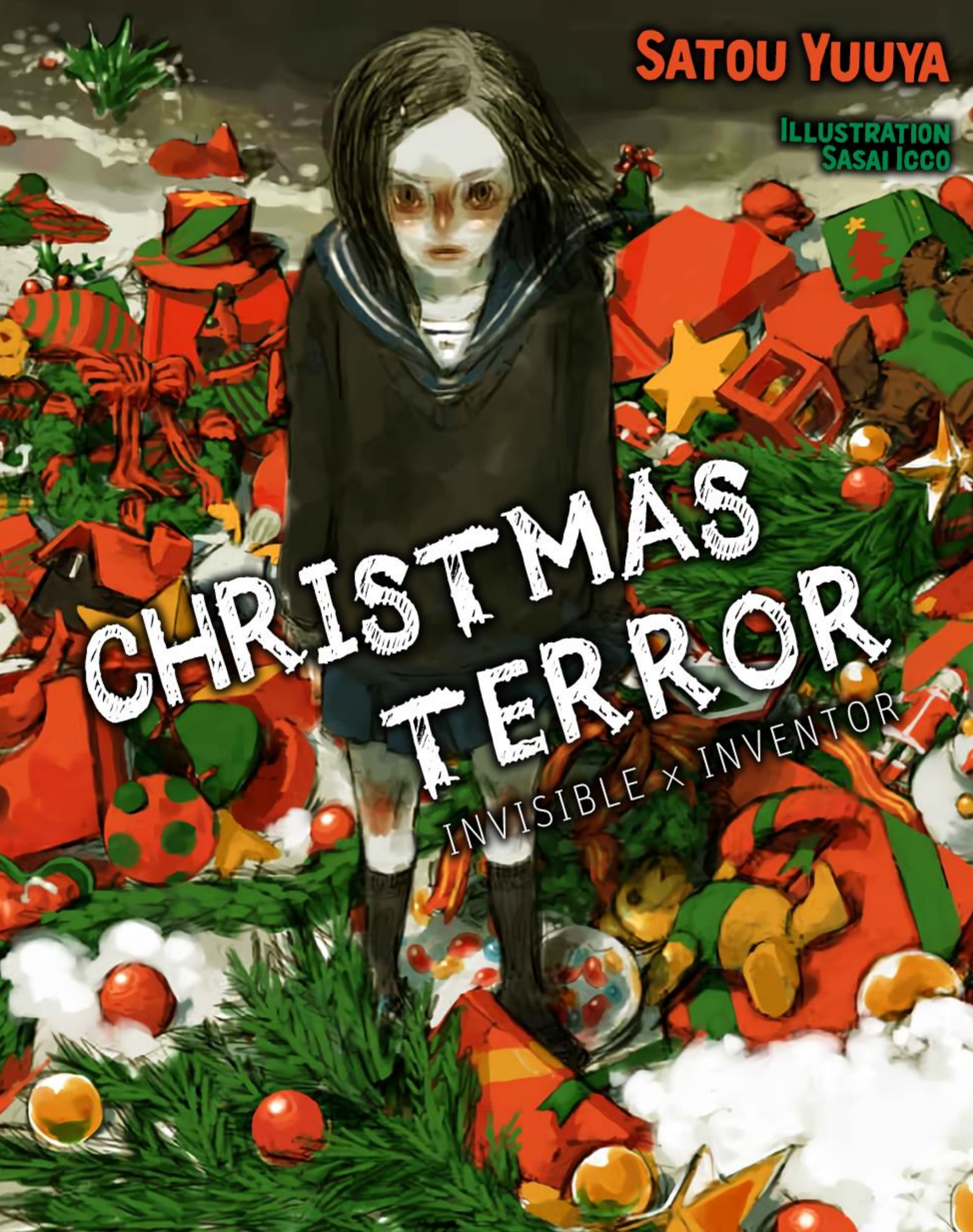


SATOU YUUYA

**ILLUSTRATION
SASAI ICCO**

CHRISTMAS TERROR

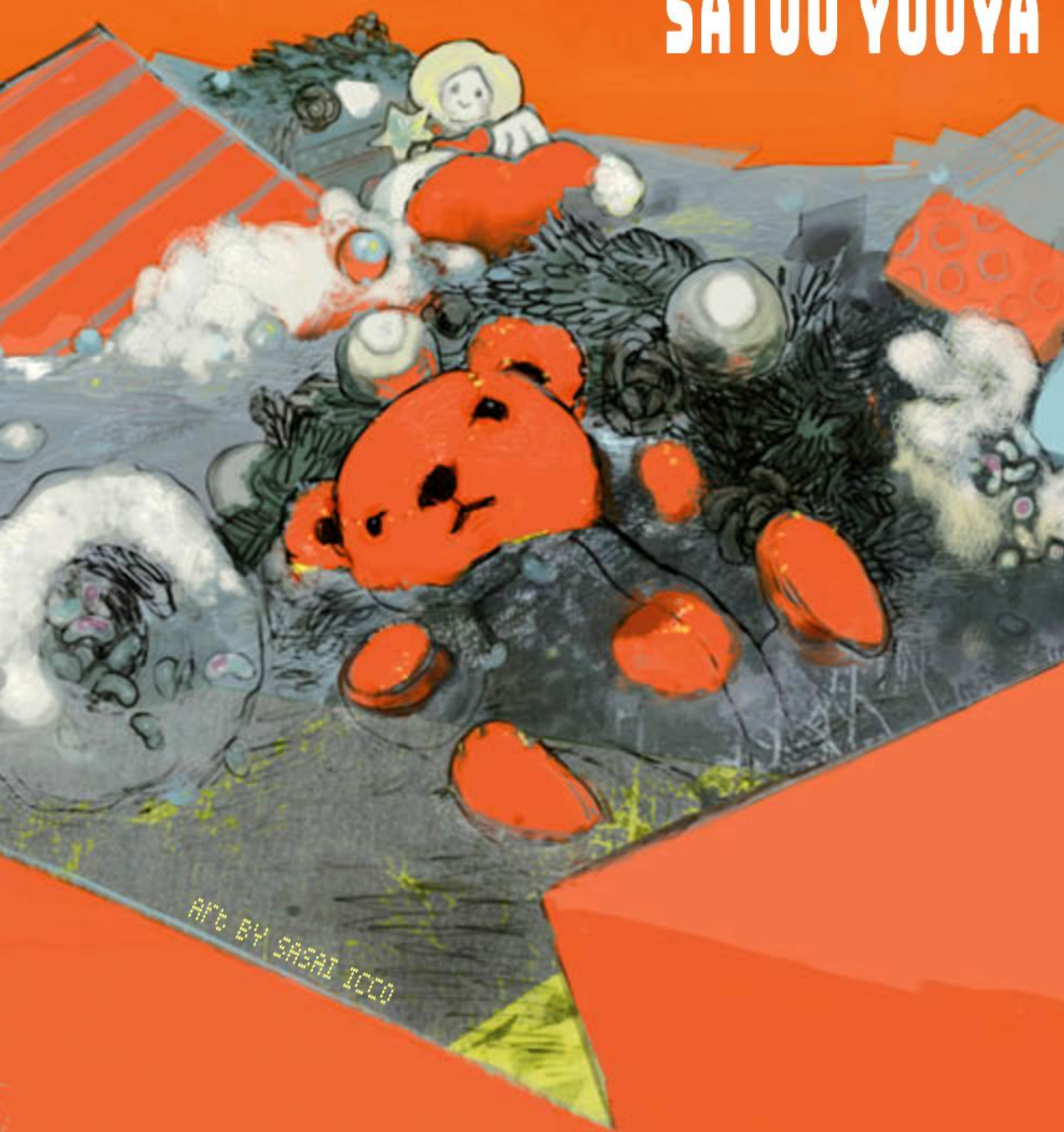
INVISIBLE x INVENTOR



CHRISTMAS TERROR

INVISIBLE X INVENTOR

SATOU YUUYA



ART BY SASAI ICCO

THE CULPRIT IS THE READER (ACTUALLY).



Sway Translations



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Spurred by a genuine impulse, the 15-year-old Touko lands on a remote island.

There, a young man she comes to know tasks her to monitor a certain man.

The man spends his days typing on his laptop in silence, shutting himself in a locked-room situation in a shed by the cliff.

Touko keeps monitoring him.

When the observer x observed structure tips over— it only takes an instant for the world to collapse!

This book contains all the worries and solitude inherent to the act of writing—

A controversial work amongst controversial works...or maybe a masterpiece?

Satou Yuuya

Novelist. Born in 1980. Debuted in 2001 as the 21st winner of the Mephisto Prize with *Flicker Style: A Murder Perfect* for Kagami Kimihiko. In 2007 he won the Mishima Yukio Prize with *1000 Novels and Backbeard*. In recent years he has been mainly writing in the field of pure literature. His works include, *Nocturne For the Ocean of Stars*, *The Danganronpa Togami Series*, *The Reincarnation! Dazai Osamu Series*, *Dendera*, and *Bedside Murder Case*, among others.

Sasai Icco

Illustrator. Born in 1975. His colorful and brilliantly-designed illustrations depicting a decadent innocent have adorned many book covers, ranging from mystery novels to children's books. Notable works include: Satou Yuuya's entire Kagami Saga, starting from *Christmas Terror: Invisible x inventor*, Ootaka Eiji's *Multiple personality Detective Psycho REAL*, Tsujimura Mizuki's *The Children Play With the Night*, and Atsukawa Tatsumi's *Great Detectives Don't Tell Lies*, among others. He passed away in 2018.





Chapter 1: The Castaway

Chapter 2: The Worker

Chapter 3: The Observer

Chapter 4: The Vanished

Chapter 5: The Cooperator

Chapter 6: The Investigator

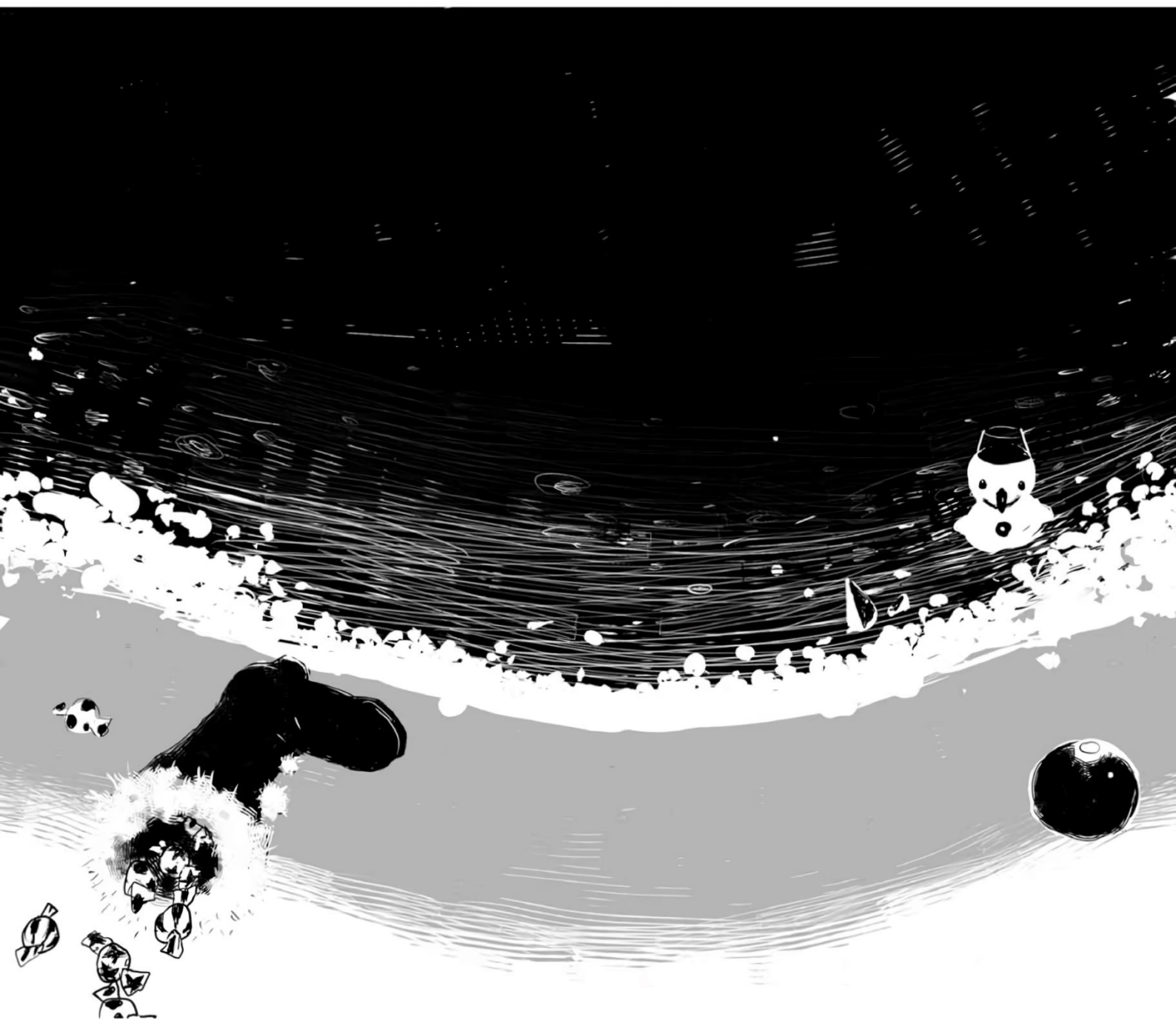
Chapter 7: The Bystander

Chapter 8: The Runaway

Epilogue

Translator's Addition: Interview from Katsuji Club's 2003 Winter Issue





I believe that authors are the same as idols in that they have gained their standing through showing others the dream of a ‘wonderful profession’ — whether deceitfully or not. Even though the internet and such are bound to peel some of that coating, I believe authors should still assume the bare minimum of responsibility and employ the wisdom that the dirty parts of the industry, as well as personal squabbles, should be kept away from the public eye. These turning into anecdotes might be seen as a positive by some, but it would be boorish to disclose everything simply because it has the potential of being a joke. Essentially, that’s what I’m getting at.

(Fukui Kenta, Caprice Center¹)

¹ A literary critic specialized in mystery novels. Caprice Center is the name of his website/blog he frequently updated from 1998 to 2007.

Chapter I

The Castaway

“Why am I doing this when I have my entrance exams next year...”

‘Impulse.’

A word Kobayashi Touko had used on countless occasions even at her young age. However, never before had she felt as much of a need to use it as today. Feeling like throwing a coffee cup at her brother’s face; feeling like pushing the alarm button in the corridor at school; feeling like jumping over the fence on the rooftop—indeed, these are all emotions emerging from impulses. However, simply calling them impulses wouldn’t be entirely accurate. After all, Touko had merely felt like carrying these out; she didn’t actually do any of that. An emotion that restraint and temperance can subdue isn’t genuine.

Touko, taken over by a genuine impulse, was curled up at the bottom of a ship. She was aboard a medium-sized cargo ship. It seemed to have been used for fishing in the past, as a tint of fishy smell was mixed with the strong fuel-oil odor that had been stimulating Touko’s nasal cavity for a fair bit. That alone would’ve been bearable, but it joined forces with the swaying, transverse force coming from below and the constant creaking inside the ship to further torment Touko’s head with a migraine and her stomach with intense refluxes. When she tried patting her stomach, it had at most replied with a groan. Changing her posture didn’t ease the pain whatsoever. She would have likely felt much better if she just threw up, but having no idea when she would have next been able to leave the spot, she refrained from doing so. She might have had to wait hours. Perhaps days, even, that was plenty possible. Spending multiple days next to your own vomit isn’t a pleasant thought for anyone. That’s why she was breathing as steadily as she could and enduring the pain. All the while regretting not having taken travel sickness drugs. However, one cannot expect a middle school girl barely equipped with any tolerance against wild developments to control the confusion and impulses running amok within her, maintain her calm, and deftly deal with the situation. Buying the

necessary clothes and food before boarding was her limit. Even so, she had managed pretty well, relatively. The layperson panics so much when faced with impulses that their experiences end with nothing happening.

Naturally, one cannot know in advance when an impulse will strike. Their very essence is to defy context. That day—for those who believe that a detailed explanation holds any meaning, it was September 7th, 2005, a Wednesday—Touko was visiting a city called Tomakomai, situated nearly 50 kilometers south of Kitahiroshima, her natural habitat. The air in that city had a peculiar weight to it, perhaps because of the nearby factories. The very moment the train's doors opened, Touko felt dejected. She regretted not having chosen Sapporo instead. She sneered at herself for having endured a full hour of her train shaking around just to get to Tomakomai and have her lungs polluted. However, she didn't want to turn her heels either. On top of that, she had already visited all the major Sapporo spots, so that city was no longer appropriate to kill time in anymore. Furthermore, she would be more likely to get sent home with the strong police presence there (especially since she was wearing her uniform). Touko cursed her garments composed of navy blue and white. Skipping school was one thing, but she'd forgotten her other clothes at home on top of her bed. Moreover, the next thing she knew, she was on a train headed for Tomakomai; can't get more depressing than that. Mindful of her unpreparedness, Touko started strolling near the station in her uniform, but got bored of it in the blink of an eye. She decided to venture further. Taking a crosswalk, passing by a cat's eye, walking past a museum, and crossing many streets she was seeing for the first time, she arrived in front of a small park. However, judging that it would be boring to take a break here, mainly due to how cold it was, she proceeded further. The further she went, the more the area lost its density.

Eventually, she found an ocean on her right side...the Pacific Ocean.

That ridiculously colossal expanse of a tint closer to black than blue was continuously billowing, showing its intention of eroding all land. However, imagining being crushed by a gargantuan mass is no easy task; Touko's mind could only produce a montage of scenes from disaster movies. She descended

onto the port. The smell of ocean water grew fiercer. Keeping her long black hair from fluttering in the ocean breeze, she headed for the wharf. It had a few containers laid out at regular intervals. Due to her mind forcibly reminding her of the show she'd seen as a kid where sentai heroes fused their robots, she approached them at an energetic pace. These containers, several times taller than her, were severely rusted; the number written on their shutter had faded beyond recognition. Touko's fantasies died down instantly. Behind them was a crane that looked like a giraffe enjoying a meal, and further in the back was a row of chimneys from paper mills. She toured the quay while observing that scenery. The more she walked, the more her bag weighed on her mind. *Why did I even pack my textbooks, notebooks, pen case, and even my thick reference books when I knew I was going to skip school?* Touko was disappointed in her denseness towards exotic situations.

Strayings from routine. She welcomed these sorts of changes and even wished for them. However, Touko merely wished—she wasn't actively pursuing them. She never manifested extravagant thoughts of *I'll change who I am immediately, I'll do my best to make a fresh start*, and their ilk. The conclusion she derived from her self-analysis was that she was somewhat too indolent to crave for the second advent of a coming-of-age novel-like experience in the form of breaking from her shell. Seeing a UFO come down from space and land would be deeply moving, but if everyone had to join hands and form a circle for it to happen, she wouldn't bother—that summarized Touko.

Therefore...she initially couldn't identify the emotion that had emerged within herself upon laying her eyes on a certain ship anchored at the quay.

“Eh?”

Realizing herself being pulled towards it in a manner as sudden as it was violent, she spontaneously raised her voice. She vividly felt her heart pounding louder and faster. Her whole body was covered in goosebumps. Her eyes were nailed to that vessel. It didn't stand out from the rest of the boats in any significant way. It was a commonplace, average, standard boat. Its name wasn't written on its visible side, but it was bound to be ordinary. Then, why

was she perturbed to that extent? Touko approached the ship, exerting no efforts to repress the inexplicable shudder swarming her body. There was a plank on the stern to board it. The moment she saw it, Touko yet again felt something surge within her.

Her emotions were jumbled.

Pressed together by an impulse.

...An impulse?

Finally, it was at this point Touko put a name on the foreign emotion dwelling within her: impulse. Today was Touko's first encounter with a genuine impulse which put her into motion. She took steps forward, as though pushed from behind. A small part of herself nonchalantly thought, *Huh, so this is how it feels to have an impulse take over your body*, but the majority was hesitating over whether to let it be in control. However, obviously, impulses don't wait for anyone's convenience. Touko's legs steadily closed in on the boarding plank... *No, stop it, time out!* She somehow managed to stall. The price for that was throwing her school bag into the ocean as far as she could. Dead at sea. She then turned around, hurried out of the port, and returned to the station. She entered a supermarket with big strides. Checking her purse: 28,019 yen. *Why am I using the money I took to enjoy the one day I'm skipping school on this...* There, Touko bought a generic duffle bag (2,300 yen), ultra thin socks (three pairs for 1,000 yen), four terribly-plain panties (each for 1,200 yen), a pair of sweatpants with a superfluous line on the side (1,200 yen), three long-sleeved shirts with designs even her parents would never buy (each for 1,000 yen), a hoodie with a dubious logo (2,800 yen), and sandals an old man would wear (980 yen). She then bought a tricolor bento (380 yen) and two onigiri (each for 120) from a convenience store, as well as a bottle of mineral water (150 yen), a toothpaste + toothbrush set (590 yen), and a towel (390 yen). She packed everything into the duffle bag, then headed back to the port.

The ship hadn't moved. The plank was still there. She boarded it. Right then, a disgusting odor of fuel oil poked at her nose. She proceeded deeper,

covering her mouth and nose with a handkerchief. She didn't sense anyone inside. ...*Still, no way it's unmanned. There must be at least a few people.* However, her impulse wouldn't cease no matter how many there were. She carefully ventured deeper and deeper while making as little noise as possible. She eventually found a cramped room with a few two-meter-tall, wooden boxes—they seemed to be some kind of merchandise. She put down the bag next to her and lay down on the floor. Her uniform would probably get dirty, but her body was screaming at her to let it recover from the accumulated fatigue, and she obliged. Her head hurt so she used the bag as a pillow. *Okay, all good.*

It wasn't good at all. Touko was currently fighting against the biggest urge to throw up in her life. This was much, much worse than simply being sick. Her stomach's contents were at a point where, instead of threatening to run adverse, coming out through her esophagus had become the default route. Any stimuli to her belly would definitely result in her throwing up. Touko changed her posture, having faith it would improve her state. However, that proved fatal. Her stomach started the counterattack. And finally, the gates were slammed open. Touko raised her upper body the instant she realized what was happening and put herself on all fours. She moved along the wall with the help of her knees and left arm. A particularly big tremor swayed the ship. The steel frame creaked. Her small frame creaked too. She then regurgitated the contents of her stomach. An ochre, sticky matter flooded out of her mouth. Her stomach convulsed. Even after she was done, her body wouldn't move for a good while. A thread of saliva formed between Touko's tongue and the disgorged matter. She spit. She wiped her mouth with her handkerchief before dropping it onto the vomit. She then returned to her initial spot, took the mineral water out of the bag, and filled her mouth with it. After some hesitation, she swallowed it. She lay down, tears in her eyes, and fell asleep.

When she next woke up, she was in pure darkness. She turned on the back-light on the digital watch resistant to water and shocks she'd wheedled from her brother on her birthday two years prior. It was eleven past midnight. The waves rocking against the bottom of the ship were noticeably different. The unruliness and fortitude that had taken over Touko vanished, leaving only mellowness. She straightened her upper body. She focused on her auditory senses, forgetting to even feel fear from the darkness. She heard a faint shout. The tremor slowly ebbed until, eventually, she could only make out the waves passing by. *Did it...come to a stop?* Touko stood up in silence and carried her duffle bag on her shoulder. She felt around, searching for the door, and left

that room. Luckily, she couldn't see anyone. The corridors were also deserted. Keeping her hair from dancing in the wind, Touko observed the land visible from the deck. She couldn't make out the details due to the scenery being wrapped in a veil of darkness. At most, she could distinguish a few spots of light in the distance, probably coming from habitations. She changed her focus to what laid before her eyes. The steep cliff made for a natural pier; the ship seemed to have stopped at it. There was no bridge connecting the deck to the land, but with how close they were—at most one meter apart—she could probably jump across. First, Touko threw her bag to the other side, then took an approach run and made the jump.

...Alright.

At least, she had arrived *somewhere*. The first step was to check where she was. However, there didn't seem to be any flags around. Only a steep cliff, a very gentle slope, and violent wind. For the time being, she decided to walk along the cliff. After a while, the gap between the land and the ocean diminished, giving way to a shore. The finely-crushed rocks gradually transformed into a sandy beach. But the many detritus of all sorts that had drifted ashore and were almost covering the entire beach gave it an eerie feeling, making Touko quicken her pace. Once she was past the beach, another wall of cliff came into view.

Deeming there wasn't much point in observing the outskirts any longer, Touko changed her sight to the land proper. She'd discovered the existence of habitations earlier, but had yet to come across any. *Is there a mountain in the way or something?* However, although there indeed was an elevation in land, it was a pitiful bulge, about as impressive as her chest; more of a hill than a mountain. It seemed impossible to hide an entire city behind it. Then where was it? Had she hallucinated these lights? Her imagination overwhelmed by negativity, Touko decided to cheer up and focus solely on walking. She did nothing but walk. The aforementioned hill was now to her right. The flowers growing on the slope couldn't exert even half of their effect in the darkness; far from that, they added to the eeriness of the mood. Only the

waves and the wind were audible to her still. Not the klaxons of cars nor the barking of dogs. The moon and stars floating above her were illuminating the scenery with an unsteady light. She found herself running before she knew it.

When, abruptly, a tower appeared before Touko's eyes.

The word 'abruptly' here indicates that the hill had been blocking it from Touko's sight, and moving made it visible to her—by no means that the tower had walked over to her. However, due to the disquiet induced by the situation and the darkness only letting her observe her close surroundings, to Touko, the tower looked like it had suddenly appeared. Comparing its size into a standard building's, it would be about ten-floor tall. It was cylindrical and had a few visible cracks in its outer concrete-made walls. Touko spotted a door. The lock was broken. She opened it and set foot inside. The moonlight shining in through the windows that had been reduced to mere frames was dim; she could barely make out the room's structure by focusing her eyes. The interior wasn't divided into rooms; it was composed of one big, circular space. The ceiling was stupidly high. The walls' concrete was fully exposed. Startled by the grim atmosphere of the edifice, she considered turning around but ultimately decided to challenge the stairs. This time, she wasn't driven by an impulse. Only by curiosity and a sense of duty which pushed her to accomplish her role and progress her own story. The stairs were set up along the wall. They were reminiscent of dungeons as depicted in anime and movies. She reached the second floor. There too, the room wasn't divided. It looked the same as the first floor. Same for the third floor. The fourth floor was shaped similarly too. Even so, Touko kept climbing the stairs. And she finally reached the fifth floor. Due to how high the ceiling was on each floor, this seemed to be the highest point. The first thing that caught her eyes were the quartet of giant windows (frames to be more precise; these too had lost their glass panes) much bigger than the previous floors', spaced evenly around the edge of the singular room.

Touko walked to one of them. A vast scenery sprawled before her. The hill she had passed by earlier. Tiny lights from habitations she could vaguely

make out in the darkness beneath her (Touko was vividly surprised that such a small hill could hide them entirely in its shadow). She couldn't observe the rest in detail in the dark, but she could barely tell that the ocean spread in the distance. She moved to the opposite window. A thin strip of land followed by a giant expanse of water. She had a bad feeling. She rushed to the window on her right. From there she could see a similar—or rather, an almost identical scenery. Fanned by an unsteady wind, her hair, which she wasn't holding in place, came disheveled and fluttered harshly. Her uniform's collar, adorned with a white strap, also flipped up. However, she didn't have the peace of mind to mind those. Despite being shackled by a feeling of despair, Touko dragged her feet to the opposite window. She spotted the beach-like spot she had walked through earlier. Which meant the cliff where she unboarded should be close. Needless to say, no land sprawled beyond it.

Land surrounded on all sides by the ocean.

Isn't that—

“An island...”

Chapter 2

The Worker

An everyday of repeating the same things over and over, devoid of any meaning or value, and as uninteresting as it comes. How could it get more boring? Going to school isn't fun, talking with friends isn't enjoyable, watching TV isn't entertaining, reading novels doesn't move me, dealing with family is a chore, and I'm not even in love with anyone... However, even so, that didn't justify boarding a ship, did it? A random cargo ship, at that. Because of it, I'm now on this middle-of-nowhere island.

Touko admired the sun shining above the ocean from the tower's highest floor. It was so bright she couldn't come up with any adjectives other than 'dazzling' to qualify it. *A splendid autumn sky...but why am I even here looking at that...* Touko let out a deep sigh and crouched down. In the end, she had spent the whole night there. The salt carried by the wind stabbing into her skin and the unceasing sound of waves harassing her eardrums had barely allowed her any rest, but on the other hand she didn't have the courage to sleep in the floors shrouded in darkness below.

She set into motion. The world surrounding Touko was a mix of fiction and reality. Salty wind, a blue sky, colorful vegetation, and an oil-like ocean. She checked her digital watch. It was exactly nine o'clock. *Nine o'clock, huh... Normally I would be in classes for the first period.* Touko was suddenly pulled back to reality by the familiar, everyday term's mention. *Now that I'm gone, who's gonna replace me and clean up the rabbit pen? Also my team is in charge of school lunches this week... Well, the school should manage somehow. I'm more worried about my family. They must be panicking hard right now. With how frighteningly worrisome my parents are, they've definitely asked the police to search for me already. And my brother who's frighteningly dependent on his sister must be going through hell too.*

"Well...not like it's my problem~," Touko changed gears and stretched. "Okay, about time to go."

Of course, she had nowhere in mind. The island didn't help by being small enough that she could overlook half of its area from atop this reasonably-high building. The only thing worth calling a town visible from here was still the one at the base of the hill. Everything else was merely an expanse of green. *How many people are even living on this island?* Touko hazarded a guess that there couldn't be over a thousand, at most. Not being in a state of mind to interact with the locals, she walked in the direction opposite to the town. She passed through fields, woods, and plains, eventually returning to the natural port she had initially disembarked on. Touko kept her skirt from flipping over as she stood on the edge of the cliff. Her vision was entirely filled with water; no cargo ships around. Touko cursed the ship that had departed and screamed internally. *If you're taking me somewhere at least make it be Hawaii or Okinawa, why does it have to be such a tiny island (though Hawaii and Okinawa are pretty small too...), what did I do to deserve being taken by my impulse to this remote island*—she shouted in anger.

Touko had yet to realize how immature that view was. Sudden developments don't necessarily lead to a wonderful world.

Touko, unaware of the role she had already been bestowed as a character oblivious to such simple logic, started walking right along the cliff where the cargo ship had previously anchored, and eventually came across two sheds.

One was situated on the edge of the cliff while the other was about 50 meters more inland. Probably as a result of the constant salty wind, the cliffside shed's walls had many faint cracks like ones you would see on frescos painted before the invention of writing. Touko felt like she could demolish it with a single kick. She ran towards the cliffside shed. It was about as big as a large gymnasium's storage room. Its blue, tutenag, triangular roof and its wide window set up on the same facade as the door gave the building an unsophisticated and crude fairy-tale aura, entirely devoid of any cuteness due to just how decrepit it was overall. She touched the blackened wall and immediately felt like she had run the tip of her fingers across an entire lime-ridden bathtub, so she promptly wiped it on the hems of her skirt.

An urge of destruction suddenly emerged within her.

Touko sporadically experienced these kinds of unpredictable—and at the same time calculating—emotions. Although it was a consequence of her moody nature, the conditions for it were pretty straightforward. It occurred in situations like: for example, when she was cleaning the rabbit pen and the two white and black rabbits ran around her, making clouds of dust; for example, when a middle-aged teacher with philosophically-greasy hands touched her hair. Well, to sum it up, when she came across oblivious malice. Touko kicked the wall with all her might, thinking of herself as a doctor removing a tumor. However, the sticky substance thwarted her attack; it was only 20% effective. She kicked it again. Her foot slipped. She kicked it again. Her foot slipped. Even so, she gave it another kick. Her foot slipped. This was almost a taekwondo vs aikido match. Touko felt stupid, but she also couldn't let it go now. She kept kicking the wall.

It didn't even take three minutes after the start of her assaults against the sticky wall for a dull shock to run across the back of her head. Following it, a dim, blue light flashed in the corners of her vision. That spread almost instantaneously, turning her world white. Touko collapsed on the spot. She lost consciousness. At most, she seemed to have minded her skirt getting dirty in the last moments.

Generally, in cases like this, one would have been put in a bed by the time they woke up. Touko was no exception to that; she had been put to sleep on a tatami mat with a towel blanket covering her body. While dealing with the painful realization that even this far away from home, she couldn't escape from the attacks of orthodoxy, she cocked her head sideways. A throbbing pain revealed itself on the back of her head. She sat up and touched the aching spot. A big bump had formed... *But first, where am I even?* She had been sleeping in a standard, Japanese-style bedroom. It had tatami mats, sliding screens, a Buddhist altar, and a closet. An utterly-normal room. *A local's house maybe? They must've found me unconscious and brought me here. This is really bad. Not like I intended on staying hidden forever, but I didn't think they would find me so quickly...* For her, who had forever assumed she would be one of the top athletes if competitive hide-and-seek was a thing, this was humiliating. *Still...* Touko thought while fiddling with the bump on her head. *Who in the world hit me? If not for them, I wouldn't have fainted nor been taken here. Geez, using violence against a lovely middle schooler such as myself, what the hell are they thinking...* Don't tell me— Touko flipped the towel blanket. She slid a hand under her uniform from below and touched her chest. *Okay, safe.* She moved her hand inside her skirt. *Okay, still safe. My underwear are still on. Wait, but is it really safe? Maybe they just haven't laid a hand on me yet. Perverts aren't always stupid and short-sighted, after all. What if they locked me up to keep their crimes away from the public eye and in the morning, during the day, at night, the following day's morning and day and night—in short, at any time of any day—they would forcefully gang rape me?* Having thought this far, Touko finally set into motion. Nobody knew she had come to this remote island. It would be stupid to expect the police's investigation net to extend this far. Touko somehow managed to keep her flustered mind together and stood up as slowly as she could. Her bag had been kindly placed right next to her provisory bed, so she grabbed it. She ran out of the room.

“Hey, not so fast, dimwit.”

“What the hell? Dimwit? Come on, that’s too far,” Touko replied to the man comfortably sitting in the living room she’d escaped into whose first words had been insults. “What’s your problem? How can you just say that to someone you haven’t even spoken with?”

“You were trying to leave without even a word of gratitude after I saved you lying out there, weren’t you? Making it look like an escape, too...” The man sitting cross-legged in front of a low table holding a teacup and pickled daikon looked her way. “People who can’t respect manners *are* dimwits.”

“Eh? Oh, so you saved me? I assumed you were trying to lock me up...”

“I could if I wanted,” he answered without even narrowing his two eyes hidden behind lame tortoiseshell glasses. “Unfortunately, I’m not that interested in you.”

“Poor taste in women, huh.”

“You’re not from this island, are you?” He put a hand to the floor and wearily stood up. “Where did you come from and how? The ship shouldn’t be here yet.”

“In a cargo ship.”

“...Cargo? The one from Tomakomai?”

Touko honestly nodded. The man looked at her as though he was observing an idiot, then muttered, *What an idiot*. He was absolutely right and there was no room to argue, but these direct words devoid of any tact to a pleasant degree hurt Touko’s feelings nonetheless. The man who, however, showed no interest in her sentiments—he didn’t seem that old, in his mid twenties at most—then disappeared into the kitchen in the back. Touko put down her bag on the floor. She couldn’t escape now. Running away was still physically possible, but Touko wasn’t cowardly enough to employ her two legs in such a situation, nor was she a bold challenger. She properly understood that her story wouldn’t progress without this man. Therefore, she returned to the Japanese-style room and fell back asleep.

I've been going to sleep and waking up way too much lately.

"Finally up?"

Seeing Touko enter the room, the man's hands froze as he was in the process of bringing grilled fish onto the Chinese-style dining table.

"Good evening," Touko slightly lowered her head while rubbing her eyes. "What time is it?"

"Eight."

"Do you have any coke?"

"No."

"What's the convenience store situation on this island?"

"One store. One candy shop. One supermarket. Pretty decent for an island with a population of 500."

The man grabbed a beer can and opened the pull-tab.

"Do you have barley tea, then?"

"No." The man poured his beer down his throat, then let out a huge sigh. "I've got alcohol made out of wheat, but aren't you a minor?"

"I'm 15," being way too young to lie about her age, Touko answered the truth. "Um, could you tell me your name if that's okay?"

"You first."

"I'm Kobayashi Touko."

"Touko?"

"Written as 'winter child.'"

"What a sissy name," the man said, digging into his grilled fish. "I'm Kumagai."

"Isn't that normal?" Touko was disappointed. "It's super normal, you know. What the heck are you calling other people's names sissy for?"

"They don't need to be extravagant," the man with a commonplace name replied while stuffing his cheeks with grilled fish. He then cleared his throat and drank a mouthful of beer.

“Um...would you be so kind as to let me eat?”

Seeing the man feasting awakened a sudden hunger in Touko. Kumagai frowned upon hearing that, and said it would be a one time thing. He then stood up, as wearily as the last time, and headed for the kitchen. After a while, he came back carrying a tray. On it: rice, miso soup, and steamed fish. No coke. No ice cream for dessert either. Well, not like her expectations were high in the first place. Kumagai put down the tray on the table, so Touko took a seat. After paying the minimum amount of respect by thanking him for the meal, she dug in. The meal was quite bland, but still 2000 times better than the fast food she usually had. She devoured it at the same frenetic pace as a furious online poster writes.

“Nice appetite,” Kumagai praised the girl facing him while grabbing his second beer. “As pitiful as a cat on the verge of starvation. So, you ran away from home, right? Not abandoned or anything.”

“Uhh, kind of...how to put it...” Touko wiped her mouth with a tissue, her gaze sticking to the empty dishes. “Running away? The result of coincidences? They’re not wrong, but...”

“You can’t even tell how you feel?”

“No, I mean, rather than how I feel, it’s—how should I put it...”

Touko couldn’t answer. Of course, even as a child, she could understand her own emotions. However, impulses weren’t so simple. Emotions and impulses seem alike, but they are total opposites. Just like how one cannot call observing a bear at a zoo and running into a bear in a forest the same.

“I bet you had no idea where the cargo ship you got in was headed, did you?”

“I...yeah.”

“You have to be crazy to get on that,” Kumagai, sitting cross-legged right in front of her, reproached her while rocking his beer can. “What was the plan if you ended up abroad? I can’t picture you bilingual, Miss Dimwit.”

“Err...I know *harasho* at least.”

“People this ignorant should keep themselves under 200 meters away from home when running away.”

“Come on, don’t treat me like a young cat.”

“I’m just saying it’s stupid to come *here* to run away from home,” Kumagai replied, his expression still as cold. “Don’t make trouble for the adults, kiddo.”

“It’s not like I came here because I wanted to either. Um, can I get a beer too?”

“I don’t offer alcohol to those who don’t work.” Kumagai took a sip of his beer. “Go eat a whiskey bonbon or whatever, punk.”

“And how old are *you*? You seem pretty young too.”

“Twenty-five. Ten years older than you. We’re in totally different positions, too. Satisfied now? Miss Compulsory Education.”

“So rude, no need to bully me,” Touko puffed out her cheeks.

“Not my intention. I just wanted to give you a taste.”

“Of what?”

“How powerless you are, and how much you’re causing troubles for others.”

“Troubles?” She deflated her cheeks. “To whom? I’m not doing anything.”

“How hecking stupid can you get... Listen, you’re causing trouble for *me*. Realize that. The next boat arrives on the 29th, in three weeks. And now I’m obligated to look after you for your whole stay. What do you call that if not ‘trouble,’ huh?”

“If you don’t want to, you can just throw me out.”

He seemed to be surprisingly caring. Even Touko, always brimming with a groundless confidence that everything will eventually turn out fine in the end, wasn’t expecting she would have such an easy time securing food and a roof.

“I can’t turn a blind eye so easily to something I got myself involved with.” Kumagai finished his second beer. Although his complexion hadn’t

changed, his eyes behind the glasses seemed to be even more squinted. “Also, there are three weeks until the next boat arrives. Want me to leave you exposed to the salty wind with nothing to eat or drink?”

Touko imagined herself shriveling up like extreme monks training to death, and shook her head in panic. There are all kinds of ways to die, but she had always been the most apprehensive towards starvation. To her, compared to that, getting stabbed in the neck would be a much better fate.

Having finished his meal as well, Kumagai carried his dishes to the sink. Touko grabbed her tray, but Kumagai stole it from her, saying she would be doing the dishes starting tomorrow so she could take it easy today. *Me doing the dishes? Who does he think he is? Well, I guess I’m not really a guest. He’s right, I’m causing trouble for him just by being here. And it’s not like he’s asking me to pay rent and food with money or my body either.*

“Okay.” Having finished washing the dishes and returning to the living room, Kumagai removed his glasses. His narrow eyes looked even more narrow without them. “I’ll go to sleep.”

“Huh? I mean, it’s only nine.”

“I know.”

“Come on, you’re not in elementary school.”

“Unlike you, Miss Runaway, I work. I’m exhausted.” *He won’t let it go, huh.* “Sleep early too. The light switch is on that wall over there, make sure to turn them off before going to bed.”

“Sure...” Touko nodded while looking at the indicated direction.

“By the way, why in the world were you kicking that shed?”

“A shed?”

“The one near the cliff. Weren’t you kicking it like there’s no tomorrow?”

“Ahh, right, yeah.” She recalled the building she’d set to destroy right before losing consciousness. “The one with the blue tutenag roof and the sticky walls, right?”

“Why were you kicking it? You had your reason, didn’t you?”

“Well, uhh...” Judging it would be pointless to try and explain that it was because of something as conceptual as her sensing an oblivious malice coming from it, she tilted her head and stayed vague, “Why indeed. Mhm, a true mystery. A mystery of the world.”

“It’s dangerous for kids to use violence without a second thought. They’re too weak for that. If their actions result in a stronger violence coming back to them, they just won’t be able to deal with it.”

“I’ll be okay, no worries. I’m learning aikido,” Touko lied. “So you see, I’ll be fine pretty much no matter what. Not to boast, but I always rank highly in matches—”

“Aikido matches aren’t a thing, dumbo,” her lie got exposed in an instant. “Also, even if you did learn it, aikido won’t help you against being hit from behind like this time.”

“Eh?” The pain on her head resurfaced in her mind. “Eh?” *Stop saying that, it’s obvious what it means!* “Ah!” A frightening chill ran up her spine at ferocious speed, headed for the back of her head. “So you’re the one who hit me!”

Kumagai nodded placidly, as if there was nothing to be surprised about. He then added, in a voice devoid of the slightest bit of remorse proper to excuses, “Though I didn’t think you’d faint.”

“O-of course I would! It hurt like hell... What did you even hit me with? It wasn’t your hand, right?”

“An ax,” he confessed nonchalantly.

“A...” Shivering, Touko felt the bump with her finger. “An ax!?”

“Well, the haft.”

“Huh? What’s that?” *It doesn’t matter...well no, it does matter in the truest sense, but...*she justified herself to no one in her head. Touko backed off like a cockroach with half of its legs crushed. She couldn’t muster the composure to stand up. “But like...why would you do that?”

“I mean, should be pretty obvious. Anyone would do the same if they found someone kicking their property.”

“That still doesn’t justify hitting someone, does it?”

“So naive,” Kumagai looked down on Touko in her cockroach state. “This is why I hate kids using violence without thinking things through.” He took a step towards her. “Despite looking like they’re not using their brains, their actions let on that actually there’s a real reason behind them, but in reality they really aren’t thinking at all.”

“D-don’t speak so fast...”

“Don’t get too involved with me. Live like a rock. Can you?”

Kumagai had reduced the distance between them to two meters. Even while flustered, she still had the presence of mind to know to close her legs; she lowered the hems of her skirt onto the ground and joined her thighs. Then, despite thinking in a corner of her mind, *Why is this guy acting so pompous when we’re only ten years apart*, she met Kumagai’s gaze, trying to minimize the emotions showing through in her eyes. However, Kumagai silently turned back, opened the door diagonal to the room’s paper screens, and left the living room. Mentally incapacitated like a set suffering a blackout in the middle of a debate, Touko returned to the bedroom and searched through her bag. She took out the toothpaste and toothbrush set, then headed to the kitchen. There, she kept brushing and brushing and brushing, putting her strength behind each stroke, to put order into the anger, panic, confusion, and all those negative emotions in her mind. Displeased by the toothpaste being somewhat more bitter than the one she used at home, she quickly spat out the froth. Looking at the bubbles that came out of her mouth made her feel worse. Once she was done, she returned to the bedroom, took her uniform off, put on a shirt and the sweatpants, then went to sleep. She wasn’t sure whether she’d dreamed that night.

She got literally knocked awake by a middle finger joint repeatedly hitting her forehead. In the haze between awakesness and sleep, seriously wondering if she had reincarnated as a hotel door, fear struck her; she eked out the words *Hey, it hurts!* and regained her humanity. Her eyes opened on Kumagai's face. He was wearing glasses. He didn't have bed hair. It seemed like he'd already washed his face. For starters, Touko asked him what this fuss was about. However, as a yawn came to her at the same time, her "What's happening?" turned into a "Whah haweeehn~?" It became unintelligible. As a result, or maybe regardless of it, Kumagai ignored her and said, "Let's get to work." *Work? Why would I do that?* Her feelings probably showed on her face.

"You thought I'd let you stay for free?" Kumagai said. "You thought I'd feed you for free? Stop dreaming aloud. Work for it."

Jeez. Looks like he's really into the idea that one has to work for their bread. I'll show him, I'll definitely marry a super wealthy Arab one day, Touko's slowly-awakening brain set itself a superficial resolve. She then quickly returned to reality. She had many objections, but this man was her only reliance on this island; it wouldn't be wise to harm his mood. She reluctantly stood up, rubbed her drowsy eyes, and combed her disheveled hair with her fingers. She was satisfied with just that for now. However, feeling cold the moment she stepped out of the bedroom, she voiced that discomfort. Kumagai then grabbed a plaid shirt from god knows where and handed it to her. Next, he ordered her to put on working gloves and pointed at a basket containing a bunch of olden pairs piled up. *Does he even clean those?* She felt a stiff sensation when putting them on. Like she was carrying an Angora rabbit. She left the house through the aluminum door in the kitchen. As the morning, salty breeze and the healthy sunlight dispelled the remaining sleepiness that weighed on her, she found her mood slowly improving. She filled her lungs with fresh air, then expelled it out at once. The Kobayashi family never went camping, so this was the earliest air she had ever engulfed—in Touko's mind,

morning didn't have more to offer than the few sighs expelled when picking up the morning newspapers delivered in the mailbox. Touko turned around and observed the building she had just come out of. A sprawling, wooden house that wouldn't feel out of place whatsoever in a ghost story. That seemed to be Kumagai's domicile. That one hill stood behind it. The town she'd seen from atop the tower yesterday, however, couldn't be seen from here. Kumagai seemed to be living away from the town. He gestured at the empty lot ahead of them with his jaw and said this was his workplace. On that lot were piles of cardboard boxes, newspapers, magazines, and more. There were also beer bottles crammed into a plastic container and a bunch of electronic parts Touko couldn't recognize. *What the heck is this place?*

"Any experience?" Kumagai asked.

"Eh?! What the—you can't ask that! The heck!?"

"Perish. I'm asking if you have experience doing manual labor."

Corrected on her foolish assumption, Touko shook her head. Kumagai then pointed at the piled up cardboard boxes and told her to package them with tape. She asked if that was her job, to which he instantly replied that yes, it was. *Jeez, why do I have to do this so early in the morning...* After closing and opening her glove-clad hands once like a doctor right before an operation, Touko got working on the boxes. There was a low table next to the piles with a tool shelf beneath it. She pulled out plastic tape and a box cutter from there before attempting to take down those stacks. The box piles were three to four meters high. There were four such piles. Touko set her sights on the relatively shortest one of the bunch. After some thoughts, she looked around. She spotted a stepladder. She placed it next to the pile, climbed it, and took the stack down one bite at a time. *Everything's going A-OK so far.* She put down the boxes on the table. However, due to the discrepancies in heights, shapes, and preservation state, she was having trouble. She tried to forcefully wrap them anyway, but the tape got loose. Feeling a gaze, she twisted her neck and met eyes with Kumagai, looking at her like a useless piece of junk. He pointed at the stacks of magazines and said these were easier so she should pack them

instead. However, she couldn't get that right either. No matter what she tried, the books would bend. She vented her anger by ripping in half a gravure idol she'd never heard of that was featured on a weekly magazine's cover. She then cursed her clumsiness and ineptness. *I can solve math equations and stuff but not even tie up a few magazines, I can't believe it.* And such.

"Oh, who's that girl?"

Hearing these words, Touko noticed another man coming and panicked. She tried to hide, but stepped on the plastic tape lying on the ground the very moment she stood up, sending her into a magnificent fall.

"Ah, hi."

Touko greeted him from the ground.

"Good morning," he—a middle-aged man wearing farmer clothes—greeted back with an amiable smile. "That was a beautiful fall," he pointed out a wonderful fact. "Hey Kuma-chan, who is she?"

"A runaway." Kumagai was wiping the weighing machine with a dust cloth. "Seems like she boarded yesterday's cargo ship. Well, snuck into, rather, to be more precise."

"H-h-hey! Please don't expose me like that, gee."

"Shut up."

"She boarded a cargo ship...to come here?" The farmer looked at Touko, flabbergasted. "If that's not reckless..."

"Couldn't agree more."

"So what are you going to do with her?"

"I mean, not like I have many options. I'll just keep her around until the next boat comes around."

"Wow, isn't that just as wild, Kuma-chan?" The farmer untied the towel wrapped around his neck. "For you to be so kind."

"Don't pay attention to what I do. Anyway, enough of that, just give me the boxes."

The new position of her eyes gained by standing up revealed the small trailer behind the farmer, which contained stacks of flattened cardboard.

Kumagai started picking those up and placing them on the weighing machine. Meanwhile, the farmer took out a cigarette from his pocket and lit it. He then asked Touko: *Did you at least give a call to your family?* Touko shook her head. Hearing this, the farmer tried to get Kumagai's permission to use his phone line, which Touko hurriedly prevented. She just couldn't fathom how to explain this situation. *Ah, hi mom~, you see, I kinda skipped school yesterday and went to Tomakomai and to the port and when I saw a ship I suddenly felt the urge to get aboard so I did and landed on a weird island in the middle of nowhere where I am now but no need to worry, welp bye bye see you soon.* She could never ever bring herself to say that. Her sanity would be questioned.

"What are you doing, get back to work."

She came to her senses hearing Kumagai. Geez. She resumed packing the magazines. When she was done tying up a set of about 30 magazines with a satisfying firmness, Kumagai had already started another task and the farmer was out of sight. As she was lamenting to herself that she had screwed up and feared the man would inform everyone of her presence, as though to prove her anguish meaningless, more residents visited her workplace one after the other. A housewife wearing a straw hat, an old man with a beard covering half his face, a young, tanned man carrying a hoe, a woman with droopy eyes; all these people and more—not like they were to blame—looked at Touko with overt curiosity and surprise. They would then ask Kumagai or Touko herself about her. *Ahh, shut up.* However, she didn't have the leeway to cover her ears. These people hadn't come here to observe Touko. They seemed to be exchanging refuse for money. The residents handed Kumagai all sorts of garbage—cardboards, empty cans, copper cables wrapped in vinyl, etc. Kumagai would place them on the weighing machine and pay them an amount proportional to that weight. These would then be passed to Touko, who had to pack and place them to a designated spot. Tying and moving. That was the full extent of her work, but that didn't mean she wasn't terribly busy. Not only was she new at it, her body wasn't used to manual labor so exhaustion accumulated quickly. Every time she glanced at Kumagai, he would be

working silently, never taking a single break. Touko even considered running away. However, remembering she had nowhere else to go, she repressed that impulse. In retaliation, she kicked the magazine tower stacked up high behind her. It obeyed the laws of physics like a loyal dog and splendidly collapsed under Earth's gravity. Kumagai threw her a look. Touko directed him a smile that emphasized her youthness to smooth over the situation, then asked herself why in the world was she giving herself even more work while piling the magazines back up. During that process, she noticed a novel snuck amongst all the weekly magazines. It was Paul Auster's *The Locked Room*. Touko picked it up on a whim and flipped through the pages. Skipping through a story was the greatest sin ever committed by humanity, but this was already a big step forward for Touko, who had never once considered reading a book filled to the brim with words, so let's forgive her.

"What are you doing? It's lunch time."

Woohoo, freedom. Touko tossed the book away (it didn't deserve it). Kumagai quickly stuffed his mouth with rice and vegetables, but Touko had no appetite. Her body was only yearning for fluids. So she gulped down a lot of water.

"Um, what kind of work is that?" Touko asked during the meal. "Why are you buying garbage?"

"Strictly speaking, it's not garbage."

"I mean, year-old magazines are just trash, aren't they?"

"I'm the one who decides what is and isn't garbage."

Kumagai's occupation was apparently called wholesale buying. He gathered garbage coming from domiciles, stores, and factories here, sorted what was still useful from what wasn't, bought the former, and sent them to a wholesale dealer as recycled goods. (By the way, the cargo ship Touko had boarded was delivering such garbage to a wholesale dealer. Which means she'd spent hours surrounded by trash. Yuck.) She asked him if the trash generated by such a small island was really enough to make a living, to which Kumagai answered that he wasn't living a life of luxury anyway. Touko was

satisfied with that answer. She had only seen the bare minimum of furniture inside his house. There was no TV or radio. She wondered what this man was looking forward to in life. She had the same thoughts about her father. He would work from morning to evening every day, even on weekends and national holidays, but not only did he not particularly like his job, he would spend his rare days off sleeping in bed all day instead of going golfing, fishing, or anything. He was leading such a boring, uneventful life that it became doubtful whether he had any interest in his own life. However, she couldn't ask Kumagai about that. A new customer had arrived. Moreover, with a mini truck loaded with cardboard boxes and piles of electronic devices. Kumagai stood up. Which means Touko had to follow him. Their lunch was interrupted. In the end, she ended up working the full afternoon until eight without taking a single break. Naturally, she had no energy left to eat dinner. She just lay down onto a tatami mat. She had never before experienced such long and harsh labor. Every single fiber making up her flesh had thrown the towel in. She was overworked and overheating. This job was too intense for her, who would get tired just bringing a print-out to the audiovisual room. Her shoulders hurt. Her head felt heavy. Her hips ached. An unpleasant fatigue had settled in her body. Touko lay face-down and groaned into the mat. She put a hand in her shirt and scratched her back. She knew she was acting like a middle-aged woman and hated it.

"Go heat up the bath."

Kumagai peeked in from the living room.

"Me?"

"Yeah."

"You really have no sympathy, huh?"

"I know."

"When you're the one who hit me in the head..." she dared to say it.

"You were in the wrong."

"I'm tired today, I'll just sleep, no need for a bath."

“So filthy. Anyway, stop complaining and go heat up the bath. Make it hot.”

“It goes against the Labor Standards Act. Talking like that to a 15-year-old girl is plain wrong.”

“Then go home.”

“I don’t have a boat...”

“Anyway, go prepare the bath. And do the dishes once you’re done. Only then can you sleep. Got it? Gofer.”

The next day was just as busy. To top it off, working with sore muscles was extremely painful. Her shoulders tingled when grabbing the plastic tape on the top of the shelf, and her hips creaked when picking up a packaged box to move it out of the way.

“Get to work. Pack these up.”

Kumagai glared at her while carrying a stack of *Weekly Shonen Jump* magazines. *That’s not how you speak to girls, much less a teenager*, she said at the man bringing her a huge amount of *Jumps*, but naturally, Kumagai replied, *You’re not a woman nor a child, you’re a freeloader first and foremost*, showing no remorse and ending the conversation on the spot. Touko felt some tears welling up, but repressed them to preserve as much fluid as possible. She continued working in total silence. Her sore muscles didn’t make it easy on her, but now more knowledgeable than the day prior, she didn’t have trouble knowing where to put packaged magazines or how to break down cardboard boxes. Therefore, as long as she could ignore this ignoble muscular pain, her work shouldn’t be too difficult (compared to yesterday). However, the more comfortable she got, the more time she had to realize how incompetent she was. She screwed up the math when weighing things, still couldn’t get the right strength when packing cardboard boxes, and took breaks all the time when carrying stuff due to her lack of muscles. She hated how useless she was. Enduring the fed-up glances Kumagai would throw at her from time to time wasn’t the easiest thing either. She was frantic to overcome this situation. To steal Kumagai’s techniques, Touko observed his work. She paid attention to where his gaze went when putting down weight on the machine, focused on his handling of tape, and looked closely at the position of his hips when lifting cardboard boxes. This might be the first time in her life she had observed something so intently. She wasn’t exactly indifferent towards what was happening in the world, but Touko had never shown much interest in things close or far to her. She had never properly looked at them. She blindly

trusted she was doing enough to get by. Therefore, even without considering the outlandish situation she found herself in, this was plainly a matter of Touko's misguided cognition. *Huh, I guess it's pretty damn harsh, isn't it?* This was Touko's current appraisal of the world. No, not quite an appraisal—merely her impression. In her current state, Touko didn't have the mindset of an investigator combing and searching for the truth nor the ensuing results.

One way or another, the second day had ended. Even in her state of extreme exhaustion, her damaged feminine pride pushed her to take a bath. She first washed her body thoroughly with soap, then entered the tub. It was hot.

"There's coke in the fridge, drink that," Kumagai told her when she came out of the bathroom. *Huh, he might actually be a good guy.* She got the fresh can out of the fridge and took a sip. The fizzling coldness coursing inside her warmed-up body felt good. Once she was done drinking it, she fell into a daze in a corner of the room.

I have nothing to do...

She finally realized that. She didn't have anything after work. Not only she couldn't call friends since her phone was inside the bag she'd thrown off the quay, there was no TV or radio. That being said, she wasn't roaring to explore the island in the dark. And she would get yelled at if she tried talking to Kumagai. So she left the house and headed for her workplace. A gust blew by her. She kept her half-dried hair from fluttering. The piles of boxes and magazines looked like monsters in the darkness. Touko spotted a stack of magazines that had yet to be packed and took out a few at random from it. She then came back, entered the bedroom she was assigned, and spread out the acquired magazines at her feet. A sports shoes catalog, a years-old weekly women's magazine with a discolored cover, a wrestling magazine, a fishing listings magazine, and...yet again, Paul Auster's *The Locked Room*. *Looks like Auster-san really loves me.* Touko picked it up and decided to read a bit. However, lacking in passion for text from the get-go, she fell off after eleven pages. Her eyes were bleary. Touko apologized internally: *It looks like you have*

a thing for me, but sorry Auster-san, I feel but distaste for your occupation. I shall at least flip through the rest to repent myself. She spotted a part underlined in red. ‘No matter how many facts are told, no matter how many details are given, the essential thing resists telling. To say that so and so was born here and went there, that he did this and did that, that he married this woman and had these children, that he lived, that he died, that he left behind these books or this battle or that bridge—none of that tells us very much.’ *Woah, should an author say that?* Touko herself was appalled, but this much was evident to anyone who has read (or written) books a minimum—it was the most obvious thing. The most important thing refuses to be told; the essential resists personal analysis and explanation. That’s why nobody has succeeded in revealing that thing. Of course, since this is wholly unrelated to authorial intent, no matter how skillful an author might be, it is impossible for them to bring that essence lurking at the bottom-most part of the story out in the open. Even so—no, precisely because of that, authors keep publishing stories. Sometimes as sacred texts, and sometimes as excrements. No matter how foolish or childish a story might be, they do so in all seriousness. Because that is their mission (even with my eyes looking down and my face all red, I wish to use my horribly clear tone to assert that). I release my stories onto the world and wait for the response of readers who understand that which shall never be told inside the work. I solely wait for the appearance of readers who will wave their hands at this chaotic darkness. And when such readers who understand my works appear, I will probably cry in the truest sense of the word. *Ahh, someone finally understood me. Ahh, someone finally received it.* I am certain I will request for a handshake containing all the trust my psyche could ever produce as I scream out such words of gratitude and emotion with my entire might like a demented soul.

The most vital thing for an author is readers who read their works.

Without these people, the production of stories loses all meaning and, most importantly, they cannot make a living out of it. ‘This is just a shallow and empty cacophony of a third rate novel produced by an abysmally normal

person (in other words, a mere bundle of words; or the field trip of a worker ant) so obviously nobody needs to read this,' these harsh but inevitable words spell an immediate end to it; however, there are also extraordinary talents that aren't recognized until after their deaths like Van Gogh (and, though it pains me to admit, the exact opposite). In other words—and I fully understand how uninspired this simile is—it's similar to how a magnificent diamond has no value if it's not somewhere people can see it. And diamonds obviously don't have legs, so they can't move an inch from the spot they were placed in. They merely exist where they are. They cannot do anything except, at most, reflecting the occasional sun rays descending upon them on a whim to desperately try to convey their presence. Then, shouldn't you, a being capable of action, do something about it? With your wonderful two eyes, your excess intelligence, and your splendid legs. Am I wrong for thinking so? Will people say I'm being excessively dependent and jeer at me? Will they say I'm shifting the blame and yell at me? Maybe. Actually, that's probably what will happen. But in my current state, I don't care. After all, these are my genuine feelings. Well, *you* aren't like these other dimwits, so I probably didn't even need to say it. To *you*, exceptionally, just like the eminent author loved by all Buddy Glass once did, I shall send a bouquet of blooming parentheses: (((()))).

Oh right, forgot to say, I don't mean this to be criticizing you all who are currently tilting your head in incomprehension. This time, I'm aiming lower and broader (supposedly). So please stay with me until the end. I don't mind if you disregard the occasional sentence. I don't mind if you confound ideals and fancies. I don't mind if you breeze through a sentence I spent many hours piecing together. I don't mind if you blindly accept the opinion of the dimwit confederacy, who take extreme delight in pointing out the lies I wrote to express something more real (as far as I know, Murakami Haruki was the first author to write a character digging a hole and hiding inside it themselves).

So please, read until the very end.

Praying, I present you with the rest:

It was her fifth day on the island, September 12th. She got that day off. She had accumulated a lot of fatigue by that point, so normally it would be best to rest at home, but Touko decided to go explore the island.

She headed for the beach she had toured on her first day on land.

It was in a truly horrendous state. Pointy shards of glass, used fireworks, vinyl bags, all sorts of weird electronic parts, and even high heels... All this washed up detritus covered the beach through and through. *It is said that Yanagita Kunio was profoundly moved when he picked up a palm nut on a beach in Cape Irago, but would picking up a plastic bottle have generated the same kind of emotion?* Pondering, she kicked a nearby fishing lure. According to the man who had brought them a stack of flattened cardboards, most of this garbage came from abroad. Touko glanced at a vinyl bag sitting by her feet, and sure enough, it had English printed on it. She even spotted something with Hangul. *I've really come far, haven't I?*

She kept walking on the island's circumference while enjoying the salty breeze. She wasn't the type to feel awe at the beauty of nature, so seeing trees whose branches were all pointed in one direction due to the frequent gusts or wild birds flying along the coast while crying in their charming, high-pitched voices left her unfazed. She didn't even question herself for being able to lump all of that into the single word 'nature' and be done with it. Therefore, the scenery dominating her vision was but a scenery. However, even she found herself two points of interest. The first one was the abandoned tower. And the second one was the two sheds—the one composed of a blue tutenag roof and four sticky walls, and the other one erected some distance away from it. It was clear to her from his attitude and actions that they both belonged to Kumagai, so there wasn't much of a mystery left, but even so, Touko knew an unpleasant emotion towards that place to dwell within herself. Her life had taken a splendid 180° turn there. She couldn't shake that feeling. It was stronger than a hunch—a conviction. However, that calm line of thinking

Too empty even for a weekday morning. Dealing with a fear of the countryside emerging inside her, Touko started exploring. As she walked around aimlessly, every person crossing her path showed some kind of reaction to her. Some looked at her with curiosity while others shamelessly started a conversation. *They must not have visitors often, huh. Speaking of, I haven't seen any lodging facility like ryokan or guest houses on this island. Maybe they've yet to develop tourism.*

"My, aren't you the girl staying at Kuma-chan's?" A middle-aged lady spraying water in front of the candy store asked her, her mouth moving at a tremendous pace. "Oh, you really are. Say, do you remember me? I brought Kuma-chan some cardboards two or three days ago."

"Uhh..."

"Well, I can't blame you. Say, are you free right now? I bet you are, want to come to my house? I'll treat you to a drink at least. Also aren't you hungry for candies? I know you are."

"I guess..."

"Well no need to hold back, come in, not like any clients will come—and even if they do, they can just take whatever. Now, now, come in."

"Sure..."

She got overwhelmed by the fast-talking lady and ended up accepting. Glass jars full of candies such as curry crackers and rainbow candies were aligned inside. Touko bought Tirol Chocolate and a bottle of coke. As she did, the lady was telling her about things she had never even asked. "Good grief, I shouldn't have had a daughter, the moment she got married it was an instant Goodbye, really gets you down, she used to be so cute, she might've been at her cutest at around your age, I guess the youth really wants to leave the island huh, maybe I'm lucky that my daughter waited until marriage to leave..." Touko reminisced the locals' faces while drinking her coke. *Oh yeah, they were all middle-aged or older. I've barely seen any children. I guess even this place isn't spared from the wave of aging society. No...maybe not. This island's core problem isn't so much the population's increasing age, but its dwindling number.* She

asked if this island had a high school to confirm her doubts, and as expected, there was no such facility. *That must be a nightmare*—with these words, Touko left the shop. Time had flown by; it was almost noon. She entered the nearby diner. Naturally, she was the center of attention there too. A beardy man claiming to work in agriculture treated her to a katsudon. Once she was done, she went back to the candy store to buy another bottle of coke, then left the town. Next, she headed for the tower. Reached. Well, this *was* a small island, after all. She entered the building. It was still dim and eerie inside, but the midday sunlight made it easier on Touko. When she reached the fifth floor, she leaned against one of the windows and looked down at the surroundings. She felt like she was looking at a miniature model. She couldn't shake the feeling that, any second now, she would hear an "Okay, cut!" followed by a director coming out of god knows where. The actors playing Kumagai, the old biker, and the rest of the inhabitants would then take their leaves and the stage would be taken down... If that were to happen, Touko would really have to go back to her original world, where the same everyday life would play on repeat until her death. She would have to graduate from middle school, enter high school, then get into a university and find a job. Of course, that wouldn't be the end of it. Life doesn't end during one's teenage years. She would have her twenties, thirties, forties...and still much more. Her body would change too. She wouldn't keep her cute and pretty doll-like appearance forever. She would gain blemishes and wrinkles along with age as her hips bend and her body develops a menopausal disorder. She would have to resort to excuses like "I'm aging gracefully." She would start using exclusively Max Factor makeup and smearing her face in concealer and foundation. However, she wasn't actually *that* aware of being on such rails in the flow of time. Touko couldn't even feel reality in herself, the protagonist of her own story. Normally, in similar situations, one might wonder if they are actually but characters inside a novel. However, having led a life secluded from books, no such thoughts popped in her mind. She merely directed her eyes at the

scenery spreading below her while minding the hazy herds of words wandering inside her head and sipping on her coke.

...Huh?

An anomaly entered her field of view. A girl wearing a white sailor uniform was sleeping face-up on the green turf. Touko tried to call out to her. *Heeeey!* No response. Once more. *Heeeeyyyyy!* No response. She ran down the stairs and left the tower. She approached the girl lying on the grass. Her black hair extended down to her shoulders. The legs protruding out of her skirt were thin and long. Her facial features were young, like an elementary schooler. Her chest was quite modest—not that Touko’s was more impressive. Touko sat down next to the girl.

“Um, can you hear me?” She attempted to start a conversation. “Sorry to be disturbing your sleep...”

“...Mn?” The girl woke up. Her eyes, at first squinting at the dazzling sun, gradually opened and revealed how large they were as they focused on Touko. “Oh, hi there.”

“Hi. Taking a midday nap?”

“Yep. Can’t win against sleepiness,” the girl said as she sat up. “I mean, I always get so sleepy at this time ooooooo~,” she stretched to her heart’s content, “~~~of the day. Phew.” She then reverted her child-like eyes to Touko. “Are you Touko-chan?”

“Yeah.” As expected, introductions weren’t necessary. “Nice to meet you.”

“I’m Misaki,” the girl introduced herself in a cheerful tone. “In third year of middle school.”

“Oh, same. So we’re in the same grade, huh.”

“We are~,” Misaki replied with lots of enthusiasm. “Third year means entrance exams, pretty sad. Have you been studying, Touko-chan?”

“If I had I wouldn’t be here,” she sneered at herself.

“True, true~,” Misaki smiled. “Well, I’m also skipping lectures, can’t really take the high ground here.”

“True, true~.”

“Ah, how dare you, you can’t just imitate people on your first time meeting them...” Having finished brushing the grass blades off her back, Misaki plucked her lips and protested. Her behavior was as infantile as her face. However, Touko couldn’t discern any forced flattery aimed to cater for society in that. She wasn’t like her.

“Exams, huh...” she let a sigh escape her. “You’re right, what am I even here for when I have exams to prepare? Doesn’t even feel like a vacation either.”

“You ran away from home, right, Touko-chan?”

“Eh? Well, yeah, ultimately I guess.”

“What made you want to?”

“What...” she was at a loss for words. *Don’t ask me that.* “Err...mhm, I might not have a concrete reason for you.”

“So on a whim?” Misaki tilted her head.

“No, not quite a whim... Actually, maybe that’s what it was.”

Touko learned of the immense impulse dwelling inside her when she laid eyes on that cargo boat. However, she couldn’t grasp what that impulse was at its core.

“Ahaha, you gotta think about that stuff,” Misaki stood up, still wearing a big smile on her face. “It stays in your head, would be a shame if you didn’t give it some thought. Right?” She then brushed her skirt.

“It stays in my head?”

“Being able to remember things like that means you can get into a good university if you study, go anywhere you want, and even get married... Kwah!” She shouted in surprise upon checking her watch. “It’s already past noon!”

“Uhh, don’t tell me you didn’t notice...?”

“I thought it was still like ten...” She worked up her legs in a panic.

“That’s why I asked if you were taking a midday nap. Didn’t I?”

“What!? Really billy?”

“Really billy,” Touko replied to Misaki, who was orbiting around her like an obstinate satellite.

“Man, this is bad, I slept way too long.” She stopped in front of Touko and lethargically raised both arms above her head as though surrendering. “The chance of the boys saying I only come to school for the free lunch just skyrocketed. Shame on me, shame on me.” She lowered her arms with the same enthusiasm as when raising them. “At times like these, there’s only one choice: skipping for good. Right, Touko-chan?”

“Don’t ask for my support on this...” her mouth warped into a bitter smile. “Ah, but won’t the absence show on your private report?”

“I can get my mom to call in for me.”

“Becoming mommy’s child when in trouble, huh.”

“Err, okay, first step is going home. I’ll see what I can do there. Here I go, Saving Private Report!”

“Sure... Well, good luck on that.”

“Thanks. See you ’round,” Misaki ran off. “Ah,” however, she suddenly stopped in her tracks and turned around. “Touko-chan, don’t forget about me, okay?”

Now, this is where things get interesting.

Of course, it is the readers who decide what is or isn't interesting. Moreover, a work's value very, very greatly fluctuates based on which part of it is deemed interesting. Recommending a hard-boiled book to someone eager to read pure literature isn't helpful, and making someone yearning for a mystery novel read science fiction would simply anger them. And if we refine preferences further...if I were to provide the people who came here first and foremost to read a locked room—the theme of the project that spawned this book (to express my gratitude for the amazing readers who have made it this far, here is a tip: You won't have to be patient for much longer, it is coming soon, good luck!)—a full-on alibi-focused mystery, they would have a hard time genuinely enjoying it. While some people snap at forceful narration tricks, some applaud them for their crudeness. Some people appreciate thorough narration filled with lore to the point they are closer to encyclopedias, and some prefer lighter narration composed mostly of dialogues. Particular words (provocative terms such as 'ultimate trick' or proper nouns like 'Multi') might get a reaction of total rejection out of some people, and the complete opposite out of others. Some people list well-made, cute, and cool characters as their prime source of enjoyment, and some hate these aspects. There are no universal criteria for what people buy either. Some decide based on who recommended it, some choose books with bad reputations on purpose, some don't see any worth in anything outside of the bestseller list, some buy everything printed by Kodansha Novels regardless of their contents, some don't even glance at novels that come with illustrations, et cetera, et cetera. Yeah, I don't know what to say, it's a big mess. Has the world lost its point of reference? Actually, did it ever have one to begin with? Isn't it common sense that there are an infinite variety of people and everyone is unique? That thought alone makes a zero-kelvin chill run down my spine. What even are the chances I can reach the people I want in this lawless zone

packed with enemies? These are the sort of thoughts that keep me awake at night. Just as an idiom, of course.

Don't blame Us, you are the reason it doesn't reach them; your distribution channels, logistics, means of delivery, and most of all your products are bad, it's in no way Our fault. I acknowledge the existence of these objections. However, as I commented earlier with the analogy of the diamond, although I fully understand these are the cries of a loser, I want to condemn your lack of effort. *If you have time to criticize Us, spend it writing stories people actually want to read. Try changing your product before throwing complaints.* I also acknowledge that these perfectly-reasonable opinions have their place. However, I'm far from being even decent at honkaku mysteries, for instance, and it's not a world I want to keep writing in either. I have no love nor interest for them. So I can't picture that kind of strategy working out, but even if it did and I earned myself new customers, I don't think I would be able to keep the act up forever. Sorry, I'm just not that skillful. My stories might be patchworks of cut-and-pasted bits, but that doesn't mean you can cut and paste their whole existences away. That's why—well no, no need to invoke causality here—I write stories only *I* can write. I keep writing them.

Now, my page number is limited so I shall refrain from writing more than necessary. Let's return to the plot. To repeat myself just in case you missed it, this is where things get interesting.

On the night of the 15th of September, Kumagai said this:

“Hey, is this work...tough on you?”

“Huh?” To convey to him her dubiousness of a scale she couldn't even begin to describe, Touko frowned with all her might.

“I'm asking whether the labor I'm making you do is more than you can handle.”

“Well, I mean, it is really hard, yeah?”

“You're useless,” he cut to the chase. “In the first place, you can't even do what I tell you. You still suck at packaging, you're slow as heck, and you take breaks at every occasion you find.”

“Yeah...sorry for that...”

“So I thought I would give you a job that even you can manage.”

“I can’t cook to save my life, just telling you.”

“Not that,” she felt like Kumagai’s eyes became more stern, “it’s monitoring.”

Chapter 3

The Observer

The shed by the edge of the cliff. Every passing gust would shake its blue tutenag roof, and over time had eroded the walls so much they'd become all sticky. *Still disgusting. Well, not like the one I'm in is in a much better state.* The shed located 50 meters further inland than the one with sticky walls—that's where Touko was. It was currently 5:11 PM. The shed's interior, made of wood from floor to ceiling, was gradually getting darker. However, she couldn't turn the lights on as that would signify giving away her presence. She rested both elbows on the rim of the window and peered into her pair of binoculars. The sticky shed dominated her field of vision. The monitoring was facilitated by the two sheds facing each other. Touko reminisced about the previous day's events as she adjusted the scaling on the binoculars.

"Uhh...what do you mean, monitoring?"

"Exactly what I said. What, you don't know the definition? There's a dictionary over there, go—"

"No, I know what it means. That's not my question," a slight confusion was growing its root inside her brain. "I mean, why in the world would I monitor anyone?"

"For work."

"Even for work I'm not going to partake in crime."

"Monitoring isn't a crime. I'm just asking you to keep watch."

"I still have my doubts..."

"Also, I'm not asking you to wiretap or record anyone. Just monitor. You only need to keep watch."

"Okay but who would I even monitor?"

"Remember the house you tried to take down? The one by the cliff. The dirty—"

"Yeah," Touko nodded. "The sticky shed."

"A man lives there," Kumagai folded his arms. "I want you to monitor his activities. The lookout period will be from three in the afternoon until eight

in the morning. You can take naps whenever you want. However, if the target shows signs of not sleeping, you are to maintain the monitoring. You can take Sundays off. That's all."

"...That's my new job?"

"Stop grimacing like a pig."

"But that shed is your property, right? Why is someone living there? Ah, are you renting it to him?"

"Don't ask questions," he replied on the spot. "This is work."

'Monitor the man living inside the shed.' That really was the full extent of Touko's mission from the instructions she was given. She hadn't been given any amount of basic information, like the observation target's name and circumstances, or the fundamental goal behind this act. She wasn't exactly dying to know, but saying it didn't bug her wouldn't be honest. Nevertheless, Touko erased the feelings of voyeurism emerging within her: *This is just work, I shouldn't pry too deep, I'm a mere observer.*

That brings us to now. The zoomed-in interior of the sticky shed was filling her field of vision through the binoculars. Though, of course, there was a limit to how much of the room they could display. A notebook right behind the window sitting on top of a black desk, a black desk lamp, and on the other side of the room, a black dresser; these were all the visible elements at the present point in time. Right now, the observation target—he looked to be between his late teens and early twenties—was interacting with the notebook. He had no remarkable feature to him; he was commonplace, average, and utterly normal. His hair wasn't long nor short, his eyes weren't big nor small, his nose wasn't high nor low, his lips weren't thick nor thin; a really average man. *I've been here for two hours and this guy hasn't stopped typing on his laptop once the whole time. What in the world is he writing? A diary entry? A program? No, it has to be way more important. He's probably working on a way to produce secret explosives. If so, I understand the need to monitor him. Still, I feel like his eyes glued to the monitor would burn with way more passion and interest than now if that was the case...*

The night eventually came. Touko wrapped herself in a blanket and kept observing in the darkness. It had already been four hours since she had started monitoring him, but the man wasn't showing any sign of getting off his laptop. From time to time he would stand up and go somewhere Touko couldn't see, probably the toilet, and come back quickly. Then, he would resume typing. Touko paid close attention to his eyes, wondering how manic he was, but couldn't discern any emotion in them—merely a vague, cold gleam. After some more time, the man started eating dinner. His laptop fell back to a corner of the desk and was replaced by a steaming cream stew. *Ahh, it looks so good.* Touko was ambushed by hunger. However, she only had sweet bread for snacks and a coffee thermos on hand. A tragedy. When the man finished eating, he returned to facing his laptop. *Looks like I'm in for more typing.* In the end, he kept going until almost eleven. After which, he went to bed. Darkness covered the sticky shed's interior. Touko kept watching it for a while, but nothing happened. *Looks like he's really done for the day.* Her job done, Touko went to sleep too. She found herself disappointed.

The next morning, she woke up at six. She stripped the blanket off her body and rubbed her shoulders. Her joints ached. Also her shoulders felt heavy, maybe due to overworking her eyes. Rubbing her shoulder with one hand, she used the other one to grab the binoculars and took a look at the sticky shed. She almost screamed in shock. The man had already started typing away on his notebook. She kept watch until eight in the morning, the end of her first observation day, and aside from toilet breaks, the man stayed seated at his desk, typing, the whole time.

Conclusion:

This guy's a moron.

"I'm back..."

On her way home, she spotted Kumagai skilfully packaging boxes, so she called out to him.

"How was it?" He didn't even look her way. "Enjoying your new work?"

"God no," she snorted. "Who is that man?"

“Don’t ask me questions.”

“Is there any meaning to monitoring him?”

“Don’t ask me questions.”

“Come on...”

“Did you forget? Monitoring him is merely your job, not your vocation or *raison d’être*,” Kumagai started lecturing her while working. “So you don’t need to know that man’s name or anything about him. You only need to keep watch.”

“I can’t just dedicate myself to something if I don’t get the meaning behind it.”

“That’s a problem with you. Don’t blame the lack of purpose. In the first place, can you even say you are leading your life constantly conscious of your goals or your reason to live?”

“Of course not...but...”

“But?” Kumagai snorted. “I’m impressed you dare use that conjunction. Listen, absolutely nothing would change from learning that man’s name or the meaning behind your monitoring. You’re in no position to cause any meaningful changes. So just shut up and keep up the watch. Know your place.”

Done with his lecture, Kumagai then immersed himself in his tasks at hand. Touko shot 5,000 imaginary arrows into Kumagai’s back before entering the house. She hastened her way to the bedroom and lay down on a tatami mat. Some ripped tatami seams uncomfortably poked at her skin. Her task was only observing, not delving into what lay behind. That was very true. However, it was also true that dividing those is no easy task. The only way to cope with a world where all points of reference are imperceptible is to find one.

However, Touko couldn't bring herself to endorse these feelings. As Kumagai had told her, her job was to monitor; she had no need whatsoever to seek for more—the man's identity, the reason behind his behavior, his favorite food, etc. That day, at three in the afternoon, Touko wiped the binoculars on her shirt's sleeve and started her second observation day. As expected, the man was still typing something on his computer. Even so, Touko kept watching, believing in an eventual change. But the man's behavior didn't deviate. It was just typing → the occasional toilet break → more typing → dinner → even more typing → sleep. The only notable difference from yesterday was that the menu for dinner had changed from cream stew to beef stew. Same as yesterday, the man stayed up typing on his laptop until eleven.

After a few days of this, I'm starting to get worried. He spends his entire day typing something, only stopping for toilet breaks, meals, and some chores. Who the hell does this? Sure, there's not a lot of recreation on this island. It's a desolate place with no arcade or karaoke. Far from ideal for young people. But still, staring at your computer all day is just insanity. There are a ton of things he can be doing instead. Like reading, or calling people, or watching TV. I'm not asking for the moon, like that he should learn how to draw or how to play piano. I'm just asking him to behave like a normal person. Not to mention, this man has almost never left the house. He only stepped out to buy groceries. He doesn't go anywhere else. There might be no amusement facilities, but he could still play with friends. (Touko had actually experienced spending an entire day playing catch and an entire night chatting with friends.) Or maybe this man doesn't have any friends? Touko's mind toyed with hypotheses drifting further and further from reality. That had actually become her way to kill time. Indeed—Touko was exceedingly bored. To use a more favorable expression, she was thoroughly savoring her letdown. To begin with, monitoring is a job that inherently tickles one's curiosity and interest, anyone would react the same if pushed into this situation. Seeing that what she did to bring about a change only resulted in

an extension of her everyday life filled her with sadness. Well, that's a path most people have to go through at some point.

Touko, aware that her attempt to flee from mundanity only led her straight back into it, repressed a yawn as she continued keeping watch. The man still wasn't acting any different from normal. Spending his days typing away. He sometimes moved his eyes up from the screen and stared out of the window, but not in an intentful way that results in actual perception. He merely shifted his gaze. *What the hell is his deal?* That question kept returning to Touko's mind again and again. *No idea. Speaking of having no ideas, the same goes for Kumagai. What's the point of having me monitor this guy? What's their relationship anyway? I'll try to sneak in a question or two next time I meet a local.* There, she realized she'd been so immersed in these thoughts she was neglecting her job. However, Touko didn't panic. After all, even though she had left an opening, she couldn't picture the man taking advantage of it.

The first Sunday since she started keeping watch then came around. That day, Touko visited the center of the island early in the morning. She wasn't aware of it, but she seemed to have fallen prey to extreme solitude. She found herself genuinely pathetic for it, but on the other hand she knew it was the natural outcome. Touko really wasn't on the introverted end of the spectrum. Of course someone like that would develop such a mental state if someone suddenly chopped their limbs off and abandoned them in a cave. Therefore, she was glad to have been freed from it—though temporarily. She was content even just wandering around the town. When her solitude eventually died down to a reasonable magnitude, she left the town, headed for the beach. The already-nostalgic strong ocean breeze and the sound of waves enveloped her senses. Touko thus confirmed first-hand that she needed these sensations. Shutting herself in her bedroom all day didn't suit her. She was walking along the beach littered with a ridiculous amount of refuse with these thoughts in mind when she spotted an old lady. A swollen vinyl bag in hand, she was taking a stroll—no, she seemed to be picking up the trash. Her working-glove-

clad hands picked up the rubbish and chucked it into the bag. The woman hadn't noticed Touko. She was fully focused on her task.

"Good morning!"

Through that greeting, the woman finally grew cognisant of Touko. She slightly raised her downcast face. Her pure-white hair was neatly tied up, and her clothes were respectable too.

"My," the elderly lady spoke in a deep, resonant voice. "Aren't you the girl staying at Masato-kun's?"

"Masato-kun?"

"Kumagai Masato."

"Heh," she snickered in spite of herself. "Quite a cute name for him, unexpected."

"Anyone's name is cute compared to what they point at."

"Are you picking up detritus this early in the morning, granny?"

"Hah, you're really calling me a granny? So rude," the woman put her bag down on the sand. "The name's Taki. Isshin Taki."

"Isshin?"

"You write it as 'one heart.' Pretty rad, don't you think?"

"'Rad' in itself isn't rad anymore, though," Touko gave an honest answer. "But yeah, it's a really cool name. I mean, I'm dealing with Kobayashi here. Do you have any tips? Like, what should I do with that boring last name?"

"I'm afraid your only resort is marriage. Also, it's still much better than Satou or the likes."

"And I'm sure the Satous out there all tell themselves they still have it better than the Suzukis."

"I really don't care about people's last names." The woman...Taki, took off her gloves, massaged her fingers, then put them back on. "This is far more important," she said, lowering her gaze onto the bag at her feet. "It makes me sick. No matter how much I pick up, leave it a month and it will be back to square one. Who the hell is this trash meant to make happy? Not even mentioning the birds eating it by mistake or getting caught in nets."

“Yeah, it must be rough.”

“Have a look at this,” Taki said, picking up something on the sand. A small syringe. “We even get this stupid—”

“Ahh! Touko-chan, it’s Touko-chan. Oh yeah, that definitely has to be her,” a familiar girl suddenly spoke from behind Touko. “What are you doing here? Oh, I know, maybe you’re helping clean the beach?”

The owner of that voice, who came into view dragging a heavy-looking bag bloated with detritus behind her, was Misaki. Instead of her uniform, today she was wearing a plaid shirt and jeans.

“Oh my, do you already know each other?” Taki opened her wrinkle-ridden eyes wide.

“Ahh! You were slacking off, huh!” Misaki pointed at Taki’s bag. “It’s way smaller than mine. Tsk, tsk, tsk.”

“You were just too eager. And Misaki, we can’t close the bag when it’s that full. How many times do I have to tell you?”

“Ah.”

“Don’t give me that, gee. Also, I don’t need any comments on slacking coming from you,” Taki shrugged, seemingly fed up, then picked up some detritus from Misaki’s bag and moved them to hers.

“Oh, hey, hey, Touko-chan, I’m pretty darn sure I already asked, but what are you doing here?” Misaki enquired.

“Well, it’s not a super deep reason,” Touko kicked some garbage lying by her feet. It rode the wind and flew quite far, but still lost speed after a bit and fell onto the sand. “I’ve spent so much time in a cramped space, so I felt like going somewhere open.”

“Yeah, it must be pretty suffocating staying at Masato-kun’s place the whole time,” Taki giggled. “By the way, have you gotten used to him yet?”

“I wish,” Touko shook her head. “Not the slightest bit. He gives me these weird jobs and always looks at me with scary eyes.”

“Ehh, but Masato-san is a kind person,” Misaki was keeping her bangs from fluttering. “Especially towards his little brother.”

“Brother?” New information. “He has one? Really?”

“You gotta be kidding me... You live together and you never asked him?”

“I mean I can’t, he scolds me the moment I open my mouth.”

“Oh I see, that does sound like something he would do,” Taki seemed convinced. “You see, Masato-kun has a brother four years younger than him. His name is Naoto.”

“Yeah, he hasn’t told me a word of that.”

“Geez, so he’s still as secretive as ever. So you haven’t met Naoto-kun either? He lives in the shed by the cliff. A pretty rad guy.”

“Eh?” The shed by the cliff. This island only had one building this description could refer to. “...The one with sticky walls, right?”

“Yeah, that one.”

“...Oh god.”

The man still kept a steady life rhythm. Touko had re-approached this job with a newfound interest since learning he was Kumagai's little brother, but even that died off in a few days. It was impressive how little the man (for the current Touko, assigning him any amount of individuality via calling him 'Kumagai's little brother' or 'Kumagai Naoto' was beyond her might; he had devolved into a part of the background, she couldn't think of him as a living creature anymore)'s behavior varied. At this point, the words 'surprise' and 'shock' had lost all meaning. All dubiousness towards to this prison lifestyle that was no different from torture had vanished from Touko's mind, and now it looked normal, utterly banal. It was unclear whether she'd grown numb, been brainwashed, developed sympathy, or resigned to her fate, but that's how her brain now thought by default. Therefore, Touko was currently watching the man like it was the most normal thing to do. All the questions that used to occupy her mind when she started the monitoring—*what in the world is going through his mind, why does he stay inside instead of going out with friends, what is he typing on that black laptop*—had now fully faded out.

...This is worse than empty.

That's how she felt. 'Empty' refers to the state of a container's contents. However, to Touko, this man didn't even have a container. He was a perfect void, complete nothingness. Her mind dominated by such thoughts, Touko peered through her binoculars as though to observe air. Naturally, she had no hopes that something interesting would surprise her. The man, who knew not of such irony—even though there's almost no point in saying it by now—was typing on his laptop. Touko put down the binoculars and took a sip of coffee. It had grown lukewarm (that thermos must be pretty awful), but since eating and drinking was the only amusement she was permitted during work, she made do. She then munched on one of the soy sauce-flavored crackers she'd bought at the candy store. *Such a rich flavor, so good. That reminds me,*

that man looks bored even when he's eating. He brings the food to his mouth like a machine and chews it almost by instinct.

Eleven at night, the lights in the shed went out. So Touko decided to sleep too. It's not like pushing herself to stay awake would have led to a fun event. Unproductive jobs are boring through and through. Touko wrapped herself with the blanket she was sitting on and lay down.

Chapter 4

The Vanished

And here it finally is. The commonplace and instantaneous unfolding everyone saw coming a mile away. This one-sided unfolding ('s occurrence) which has been ongoing ever since a Bornean orangutan murdered a mother and daughter 160 years ago. Although welcoming it with a 'Sorry to have kept you waiting' would be presumptuous, that's the law, and the law is absolute. Anyone who has a problem with the rules of the game has no other choice but to shut their mouth and vacate the place.

What you are about to read is a cowardly act of terrorism.

A pathetic and miserable one incapable of even intimidating through violence, one that nobody takes notice of from their subjective standpoints.

Let some carelessness slip by, and even some of you, whom I offered a baseline of objectivity to, might even fail to notice it... Pardon, I shall stop the fear mongering here. After all, I have an obligation to unconditionally trust in the readers.

We were on the 26th, only three days were left before the next cargo ship's arrival. That day too, Touko was keeping watch. This task had already devolved into a mere chore to her. To use a more tragic simile, it was like driving a car: At first, one puts great care in every motion they make—they are cautious—but add some habit to that, and it will lose what made it special; the scenery passing by the window will become an ordinary sight. And to Touko, her binoculars were less than a wheel, and the man less than a drifting scenery. Well, it's only natural this would happen after ten days at this job.

It was 10:13 PM. Like every day before, the man was spending this one having a close meeting with his laptop. Touko pondered as she yawned: *Do people like this really exist? People who spend their entire days typing away on a laptop? If they do, they are definitely an anomaly. Which would make this guy a weirdo too. Well, he might be. Even when he steps out of the house once in a blue moon, it's not like he does anything. He just buys groceries. He doesn't even buy a single magazine. He doesn't even meet up with acquaintances or friends.* In that sense,

this man was like air. 'There's no way someone like that actually exists.' If Touko, who had observed him with the utmost patience, were to make that assertion, nobody would be able to deny it. Even the observation subject, the man himself... *Ahhh, screw it. I can portray and think about him all I want, that won't change anything to the situation.* Touko had this realization while taking a bite of her jam bun. It was now 10:45 PM. The exterior world fell into darkness. As always, the man's behavior showed no changes. *Boring.* Touko took her eyes off the binoculars and slightly shook her head before returning to it.

The man had vanished from before the desk.

She guessed he must have gone to the toilet and waited, but he wasn't coming back. She then assumed he was taking a bath, cleaning the room, or doing some other chore and waited some more, but he still wasn't coming back. When she had finished her jam bun and had drained the entirety of her thermos, Touko finally started to feel some distress. *He's taking a long time.* She pondered over the possibility of him cooking, but he hadn't taken a late-night snack even once in her monitoring period. Of course, neither had he cooked one.

30 minutes had passed since his disappearance.

Touko was keeping up the watch, not averting her eyes for a single second. The black laptop, the black desk, the black desk lamp, the black dresser. That's all she could see. She considered the possibility of him having left the building, but the shed's only door was right next to its only window which she was monitoring, so that wouldn't work out. Any chance she had missed his escape...none. There was about 50 meters to that shed, but since her mind was pretty focused on that area, she would have noticed any movement. Also, she had only taken her eyes off the binoculars for a few seconds, it would be difficult for the man to exit the shed in that amount of time. Which meant he was still inside. However, even after one hour, two hours, he didn't show up behind the desk. No matter how much time passed—no matter how much she waited. It was now two in the morning. She hesitated for a bit, but ultimately stood up. Her mind was swimming in confusion. *What happened? No, did*

something even happen? She was experiencing this type of uneasiness that appeared when one isn't sure of something extremely basic; in other words, the prelude to anxiety. She had been abandoned to a world where she knew full-well only more confusion was waiting for her. Touko left the shed. The cold wind fluttered her hair as always, but this time she didn't have the composure to deal with it. Her eyes glaring at the window from which the man couldn't be seen, she ran towards the sticky shed. She reached it in an instant. She peered through the window she'd close in enough on to render binoculars useless. She then twisted the doorknob. The door was unlocked. She pulled it open in one motion.

For the first time, she saw the shed's full interior.

It was a few hundred times more plain that she'd imagined.

To the left of the door was the black desk, black laptop, and black desk lamp. In front of those was the window she'd seen to death already (though from the inside here). On the wall opposite to the desk was that black dresser. Surprisingly, the room had...no more than that. Touko nearly burst out laughing from how inexistent the decoration was. *You see the same damn thing from the window and from the inside!* She entered the shed with heavy breathing. The layout and size was pretty much the same as her shed's. The walls were perfectly sticky on the outside, but no such thing was to be seen on the inside, obviously. The planks were clean and reflected the quality of the wood well. There were no carpets, posters, calendars, or clocks. She spotted a kitchen in the corner of the wall that had the dresser. It was as compact as an elementary school classroom's washbasin. There was a space underneath for storage disorderly filled with pans, utensils, and canned food. There was a door next to the kitchen. Touko slowly opened it. It led to a room with a toilet, a bathtub, and a shower. (By the way, Touko's shed only had a toilet.) The bathtub was empty. There was no window or air vent. She left that room and took another look at the main one.

The man was nowhere to be found.

“He’s not here!”

Her high-strung voice was almost shouting. Maybe as a result, Touko felt a tiny perturbation in the room’s air. Moving her almost-trembling legs, she made her way to the black desk. She checked the window. It was locked alright. That window should’ve been facing the shed Touko had been observing the man from, but she couldn’t even distinguish its silhouette in the darkness. She then moved her gaze to the laptop that was still on. A blue background. *No wallpaper, huh...but who cares right now.* She touched the chair. It was still warm. She looked around at the room, but what doesn’t exist simply doesn’t. *He’s vanished! Vanished?*

“Argh,” Touko hit herself in the head. That didn’t cool her mind, but it was still better than nothing. “Where the hell did he go!?”

She then dashed out of the sticky shed. She ran across the flat land illuminated solely by the moonlight. The incessant ebbs and flows of the waves teasing her ears only amplified her confusion, so she plugged her ears. And in this silent world, she thought:

The man has disappeared.

But that’s...

...Plain impossible, right?

Exactly, that phenomenon was physically impossible. In the realm of common sense, there is no way for a human to vanish into thin air in a locked room situation. Well, the sticky shed’s door was unlocked, but since Touko’s monitoring played the role of the ‘lock’ here, we can call this a locked room in the broad sense of the word. Touko’s gaze was definitely focused on the man until mere seconds before his disappearance. In other words, the time he had to perform his escape was what it took for Touko to take her eyes off the binoculars, shake her head, and peep back in once she felt refreshed — five seconds at most. Also, it’s not like Touko suddenly went blind when she wasn’t looking through the binoculars. Her eyes might not have benefitted

from the zoom, but they were functioning perfectly well. So even if the door had been opened for any amount of time, Touko would definitely have noticed it. She was confident of that herself too. The only escape route left was the window, but that was the main focus of her monitoring, it was absolutely unthinkable. *Then...where did he leave from?* She had disproved the existence of an alternative way out when checking the rooms earlier. *Then what, a secret door?* No, those are only acceptable in weird mansions showing up in novels. There was no way a shed as filthy as that could have such a thing. *Then how did he disappear? Is an Anywhere Door acceptable? Is teleportation fair game? Who am I even talking to?*

Still disoriented, she reached Kumagai's house. The lights were on. He seemed to be staying up late for once. He was in the living room.

"Hey, why did you come back?" He looked at her. "Heh, I see, you got guts to be slacking so—"

"We don't have the time for your lectures!" Touko was on the verge of kicking Kumagai. "H-he disappeared."

"Huh?"

"He, uh, you know," Touko kept hitting the dining table with her palm. "Ahhh, well, he vanished! Your little brother."

"Huh?"

"I'm saying he's gone, he vanished somewhere."

"...Weren't you keeping watch?"

"I was, but he just disappeared—"

Kumagai sent Touko flying and ran out of the room. Touko hurriedly stood up and followed after him. Kumagai was sprinting as fast as he could in the night. Only their footsteps could be heard. Touko raised her face on a whim and caught the moon shining in the darkness. She was back to the sticky shed. Kumagai opened the door and entered inside.

"Where did he go?" He spoke at a fast pace while looking around the plain interior. "Why weren't you watching, hey?!"

"Please, I was watching."

“Die. How did you let him go then?”

“I didn’t. Um, he vanished inside this shed. I swear I’m not lying. I mean, I was looking at the window and—”

“You should vanish. Stop saying dumb stuff.”

Kumagai pressed a hand against his forehead. He then entered the bathroom, inspected it, and exited the shed with a strangely-heavy gait. Touko asked what they should do but got no answer. She considered following Kumagai home, but he would just keep complaining at her, so she decided to stay. Touko still had trouble accepting the situation. Kumagai didn’t believe her, but the man had really vanished from a closed space. She had no idea how he’d done it. *The tunnel effect?* Woah, you’re really going to bring that up? The probability of that happening is one over a one followed by ten to the power of twenty-four zeros. In your dreams, dumbass. I bet it hasn’t occurred a single time in the universe’s lifetime. *Then was some trick used? But what kind?* She had no idea. There was one more thing she couldn’t wrap her head around: the reason the man used a trick. He could totally have left by the door the normal way, so why had he chosen this fantastical option? There weren’t even many witnesses. It’s not like he could be satisfied by just fooling Touko. *Well no, he might be, there’s no telling. Do I really think so?* She had no idea. In the end, it always came back to that. Touko was incapable of profiling that man’s thought pattern. She couldn’t imagine even a fragment of his thoughts and feelings. Touko’s poor imagination wasn’t to blame, however. If anything, the man was at fault. He’d shown this perfect model of a human lifestyle, leaving nothing but the word ‘human’ to define him, and expanding from such a broad definition was virtually impossible. Touko hadn’t seen that man smile or be angry, nor had she heard his voice, nor did she know how he interacted with others. The only thing Touko knew was this lonely sight of him typing away on his laptop... *Laptop!* It had completely slipped by her. She might get a clue from looking at it. The data he’d inputted in there should’ve been the equivalent of his expressions and emotions. At the very least, it might contain a hint to better define his world. Touko ran to the laptop.

The screen is black.

The screen is black?

The laptop that was on when she'd checked earlier had been turned off before she knew it. She pressed the on button but nothing happened. She lifted it and noticed: the adapter and the battery had been removed.

The rest was really simple. Kumagai called the police and the island was combed through. Touko was sent back to Hokkaido, punched by her mother, scolded by her father, and yelled at by her brother.

Chapter 5

The Cooperator

Since then, Touko had acted like a complete wimp. Her enthusiasm towards studying, which was already pretty frail, only grew more inexistent, her personal relationships got sloppier, and the process of nurturing some kind of worth for her world became a huge chore and nothing else to her eyes. Even so, life goes on relentlessly, and Touko had to partake in it even with a drifting mind. Time passed, but it was now October and she still hadn't escaped that half-hearted world. Keeping her distance from reality helped her psyche endure it. Charging in with just one foot isn't a stable strategy by any means. Actually, she wished one of the sides would have taken her away: Either be completely overwhelmed by reality, or fully indulge into delusions.

Having gone through her daily life in this unsteady state of mind, Touko was about to take the next step—whether she liked it or not.

October ninth. Two in the afternoon on a Sunday. Touko was ambling on the streets of Sapporo. She had already purchased the books and accessories she was after, and was now strolling the city without any objective in mind. She spotted a coffee shop across a ramen restaurant. Feeling a tad parched and affected by her overstay in the cold, she was entertaining the thought of taking a break there—when the next step appeared.

It was a couple.

A girl about the same age as Touko, wearing a heavy hoodie over a camisole and a skirt covering down to her knees, and a boy also Touko's age, wearing a brown jacket with assorted denim pants, were headed her way from the front. For no particular reason, Touko's gaze was drawn to them. Although they were walking alongside one another, they didn't quite look to be on friendly terms. Or rather, the boy was doing all the talking while the girl didn't give him the time of day, either through words or movements of the head. She looked straight ahead with her rather-large black eyes and walked on, her shiny and long hair rocking in her trail. Her attitude, impermeable to

the nasty playboy (she just decided that's what he was)'s attacks, made a favorable impression on Touko. However, the playboy wasn't taking the hint at all; he was spilling words through his loose mouth incessantly. An urge to resort to violence against this oblivious malice welled up inside her. But this time, she didn't actually carry it out. After all, she was dealing with humans—a man, at that. She would risk suffering some kind of backlash. Being sly and wimpy, Touko settled on merely glaring at him a bit. When their paths would cross, she would throw him a look like she was looking at some trash lying on the side of the street. She skillfully corrected her course so they would pass right next to each other, adjusted her pace, and waited for the right moment. The distance separating her from the pair grew smaller: ten meters, five meters, three meters...and finally, one meter. The playboy was in a perfect diagonal to her. Touko moved her gaze...somewhere else. Her toes got caught on a crack in the asphalt. A brilliant fall. Like you'd see in a manga. The pair stopped walking. And to the next step we go:

“Oh, so you’re twins?” Touko moved her eyes back and forth between the faces of the two siblings sitting across her as she patted her scrapped right knee. “You don’t look like ones, though...”

“Yeah, if I may state the obvious, we’re fraternal twins. By the way, your knee is bleeding but are you okay?” the boy she’d taken for a playboy replied while pouring a sugar cube in his coffee. “Also, though this is obvious yet again, not all twins are identical. And to state the obvious further, a situation like *Mint na Bokura* is actually impossible.”

“I see...”

“Well, enough of that. You see, we’re fighting day and night to put an end to these preconceived notions towards twins.” He then looked at the girl sitting next to him. “Right, nee-san?”

However, that girl didn’t show the slightest reaction. She kept on looking at the world outside the window. “...Aren’t you being totally ignored?”

“Oh, I’m so used to it I didn’t even notice,” he said, facing Touko anew. “Right, we haven’t introduced ourselves yet. I’m Hiroyuki. And here is my older sister, Yuika. We’re both in our sweet sixteen. Nice meeting you. Don’t worry, we’re not obnoxious so feel free to approach us however you want.”

“Ah, I’m Kobayashi Touko. I’m still in my third year of middle school, but nice to meet you.”

Touko bowed with her head. Following that, the sister whose focus had been entirely directed towards the window up to this point...Yuika, moved her eyes over to Touko in an unhurried motion. Then, still just as unhurried, she bowed down and said *It’s a pleasure meeting you* in a wonderfully-quiet voice. That’s when Touko finally noticed that this Yuika girl’s face never budged, like she was wearing a Noh mask expressing a blank emotion.

“Third year?! Woah, so young.” *Why does it make him happy?* “So you have entrance exams soon, right? Which high school are you going to?”

“Ah, still undecided.”

“I never went to high school so I shouldn’t really comment, but good luck.”

“Eh?! You don’t go to school?”

“Come on, no need to act that surprised. Yeah, I graduated middle school and have been a freeter since,” Hiroyuki glanced at the lemon tea sitting in front of Yuika. “I just don’t have the smarts. Crazy there can be such a gap in academics between twins,” he then put a sugar cube in the lemon tea and stirred it with a spoon. After which, he pulled it up to his mouth and blew on it. “That’s the tragic part of fraternal twins.”

Hiroyuki handed the lemon tea to Yuika, who said in a stupefyingly-quiet voice, *Hiroyuki-san is more cunning*, before drinking it elegantly without making a sound. *Given her tone, she probably meant it as a compliment and not a joke or sarcasm, but—wait, didn’t they just do something really weird?*

“A freeter huh, it might not be all that bad,” Touko sipped on her hot chocolate, pretending to have not seen anything. “I mean, at this rate I’ll actually have to become one.” She didn’t say that to create a sense of sympathy; that was the reality. “I’m just not studying.”

“It’s still October, you have all the time in the world. When did you start studying for them again, nee-san?”

“August of my first year,” Yuika softly and seamlessly answered.

“Hah, that really didn’t help.”

“Yeah, it had the opposite effect.”

“If that works you up so much, why don’t you study, then?”

“Well,” Touko tapped the cup with her fingernails. “You have a point...”

“Can’t get your motivation up?”

“It’s more that I still kinda feel like it’s summer break.”

That was Touko’s appraisal of where she was on the blurry line between reality and delusions.

“Hoh, summer break in fall is quite alarming.”

“Alarming?”

“It means you’re in no state to even be following the seasons.” Hiroyuki raised his cup of coffee to his mouth. “What could have shaken you to that point? Oh, a heartbreak maybe? Right, it has to be, isn’t it? Woah, I’m so jealous. Actually, you see, I find middle schoolers’ heartbreaks fascinating. Ah, but I don’t care about the middle schoolers themselves, okay? I swear.”

“What are you saying?” So he is *obnoxious*, noted. “It wasn’t really a heartbreak. Um...”

“It wasn’t?! You’re saying there’s something other than a heartbreak that can shake one this hard? I, for one, can’t believe it.”

Hiroyuki pulled out cigarettes from his breast pocket and pulled the ash-tray closer to him. He offered one to Touko, which she obviously turned down. He also held out the box to Yuika, who wasn’t paying any attention to nor was endorsing her little brother’s behavior; she simply kept stroking her long hair in silence. Her personality seemed very steady, in many ways.

“Tobacco is poison for your body,” Touko felt the need to say that.

“It’s okay. We’ll probably develop a cure faster than cancer can destroy my lungs. Also, I have more money than I know what to do with.”

“Wow, so needlessly positive.”

“But who cares about my relationship with tobacco,” Hiroyuki put a cigarette to his lips and lit it with a zippo adorned with the Hershey’s logo. “I’m much more interested in knowing you better.”

“Hiroyuki-san,” moving her herbivorous eyes onto her brother, Yuika talked in a voice as loud as an ant’s whisper, “nothing lewd.”

“I won’t!” Hiroyuki spat out his cigarette. “I’m not such an easy man! If anything, don’t you think I’m heavy?” he said while stroking Yuika’s head. She didn’t show any reaction, her head only bobbed sideways. “Ah, err, Touko-chan, was it?” He then looked at Touko. “You too, don’t make that face, come on. That’s not what I meant by wanting to know you better.”

“What else can that mean?”

Touko took a sip of her hot chocolate.

“Your summer break.”

“My what?”

“The summer break you still can’t let go of,” Hiroyuki removed his hand from Yuika’s head. “I wanted to know more about it. Really, I’m not making it up.”

“Why...why would I tell you about it?”

“Why not, you have nothing to lose. Also, don’t you want to talk about it yourself?”

Hiroyuki pupils took a mysterious color beneath the smoke.

“That’s...”

Maybe I do. Maybe I want someone to listen to what happened over there.

Touko’s mind was pulled back to the island.

She instantly recalled all the building blocks.

The ocean, the tower, the salty breeze, the locals, the sheds, her work, Kumagai, Naoto, Taki, Misaki.

The monitoring.

The disappearance.

“That’s?” Hiroyuki insisted. “Go on, tell us.”

“Eh, erm...”

Touko slightly lowered her gaze.

I don’t recommend it, an almost-imperceptible voice said so. Touko raised her face and noticed that Yuika was looking at her. She tried to lock gaze with Yuika’s drifting eyes, but struggled to.

“Oh please, that’s uncalled for, nee-san. Just when Touko-chan was about to open her mouth and heart to us...”

Yuika then muttered, *Hiroyuki-san is the kind of person to commit murder just to stave off boredom*, and returned to her lemon tea.

“Ugh, nee-san, don’t treat your little brother like a prince from the planet Dogra.”

“But it’s true.”

“...Hmm.” Hiroyuki folded his arms and exaggerated a ruminating expression. “Right, you might be onto something.”

“Then heck no, I’m not talking,” Touko butted in, flustered.

“But you can’t let your summer break go on endlessly either, can you?”

“I mean, I guess.”

That’s pretty true. Society isn’t so lenient one can go through it feeling like it’s summer break. Entrance exams are far from the last tests, and there’s still the whole job-hunting process after that. I’ll also have to find a man willing to support me. She couldn’t imagine herself clearing all of these hurdles while still entrapped by delusions.

“Then try telling it to me. I’ll resolve your worries for you.”

“Resolve?”

Touko reacted to these words.

“Exactly, resolve,” Hiroyuki nodded.

“...Really?”

“Well yeah, of course.” *He seems awfully confident.* “It might not be a resolution in the proper sense of the word, but I can at least make the situation progress.”

“Hm...” Touko brought her hot chocolate to her lips. “Um, I’ll speak, then. Ah, but it’s really not that interesting.”

“I don’t mind.”

“So some time ago I went on a cargo ship...”

(Abbreviated for redundancy and limited page count.)

Having listened to the entire story and started his second cup of coffee, Hiroyuki leaned against the back of his chair and, his eyes directed onto the vast world beyond the window, muttered *What could it be* in an absentminded tone.

“What could it be? Which part are you talking about?”

“Well, your problem runs quite deep,” he said with a somewhat troubled expression. “Your summer is a convoluted mess.”

“Yeah?”

“And it can’t be resolved simply by elucidating the mystery behind the disappearance of that Kumagai guy’s little brother. We’ll also need to explain things like the meaning behind the break-off in the Kumagai brothers’ relationship and your own feelings towards that island, or your summer break won’t ever truly weather.”

“Well, yeah, probably,” Touko sent the ball back while toying with her empty cup.

“It’s like characters that appear in mystery novels. You think the suspects would be satisfied if the detective just revealed the culprit’s name and only that? Of course not, they want to know the trick, the motive, and all that. The reason is simple: By shining a light on these dark areas until they are fully satisfied, their disrupted minds can finally retrieve a sense of composure. In that sense, Touko-chan, your state of mind would be equivalent to that of a suspect.”

“Not a fan of that comparison,” Touko chuckled. “So what, are you the detective?”

“Not in a million years. I’m not made to be a detective. Don’t you think so too, nee-san?”

You’re the culprit, after all, Yuika replied.

The culprit?

“Oh please, this time I’m not. But yeah, anyway, I’m just not a detective. Therefore, I won’t explain that locked room right here.”

“...Huh?” Touko nearly stood to her feet by reflex. Her hips might’ve jumped a few centimeters above the chair. “Uhh, wait, didn’t you just say something outrageous? Something-something about the locked room?”

“Not something-something, I said I won’t explain the locked room right here,” he replied with wonderful ease.

“...You solved it?” Touko didn’t even notice the pathetic half-open state she was leaving her mouth in. “The locked room?”

“Mhmm, rather than solve it, I just found what feels like the only possible answer.”

“Th-then—then please tell me!”

“No can do,” Hiroyuki produced a cigarette and burned its tip. “Forgot already? I’m not a detective. Also, revealing only part of the truth wouldn’t help stabilize your psyche.”

“But—”

“And my conjecture might totally be mistaken. It’s merely the result of resorting to the process of elimination; I haven’t given any amount of thought to the chances it has of being right. Also, it’s very much groundless, it can easily be overturned with new information.”

“Still, how would I not be curious after hearing that?”

“I mean, I bet you are.”

“If you think so then—”

“Let’s go investigate the field.”

“Huh?”

“You know, the field.”

It means the place in question, Yuika explained.

Yeah I know! That’s why I’m surprised. “...Uhh, do you mean ‘field’ in *that* way?”

“Yup,” words flew out of his mouth as carefreely as the smoke that accompanied it.

“So we’re going...to the island?”

“Yeah.”

“But, uh, how?”

“By boat,” Hiroyuki replied, yet again with ease. “I don’t mind going by plane, but we can’t really land without an airport, can we? Oh, but,” he put his cigarette down on the ashtray and glanced at Yuika. “Nee-san, didn’t you hate airplanes? Hmm, what to do... How do you want to go to the island?”

“Then, in a submarine.”

October 15th, a Sunday. Nine in the morning, when the slowly-rising sun appeared dazzling. A duffle bag on her shoulders, Touko was once again standing on Tomakomai's quay. However, this time, she wasn't possessed by an impulse. Though, as though to make up for it, her feelings were disrupted by a vague anger directed at the absurdity of the situation she found herself in.

Keeping her hair from fluttering in the salty wind, Touko glanced at the cargo ship stopped on the wharf. It was of the same model as the one she'd boarded that day. *Did they rent it? How much does it even cost per day? Are there fees if you go over the rental period?* All these thoughts were just escapism.

"Shall we go now, Touko-chan?"

Hiroyuki, seated on the cleat—the mushroom-ghost-like thing present on any dock, perfect for Kayama Yuzo to stand on with one foot—sent her a perfect smile. He seemed to be the one who procured this boat. *Who the hell are these siblings?*

"...Umm, are we really going to that island?"

"Oi, oi, isn't that a bit late? Everything's ready, the last step is taking off. I'm not letting you call it off now. Not after nee-san did her best to wake up early on a Sunday despite not being a morning person. Just look at her, look at how sleepy her eyes look."

Prompted by these words, she examined Yuika, standing next to Hiroyuki, but failed to find anything different compared to their last meeting beneath the Noh mask. Wearing a jacket so elegant it would put a smile on anyone's face and a long skirt—AKA, dressed like she was going on a vacation—Yuika paid no heed to her long, black hair freely fluttering in the wind, and delivered the few words: *I'm very sleepy*. By the way, Touko was wearing a hoodie with jeans.

"See? Don't even think of canceling. Do you really want to put all of nee-san's efforts to waste?"

“Why are you picking on me?”

“Hmm, that’s a very complex question,” Hiroyuki said with a mysterious expression—but still the same tone. “But thinking about that won’t get us anywhere. You’ll figure it out once we take off. You can understand better with first-hand experience.”

“Huh? Don’t talk like you know it all,” Touko snorted. “I bet you didn’t give it any thought, did you?”

“Of course not.”

“Tsk.”

“But it’s a fact that your situation will evolve,” Hiroyuki got off the cleat. “So don’t mind the details and charge in, okay? Now, are your mind and body ready? You didn’t forget the snacks, did you?”

“Snacks?”

“Yeah. What, you didn’t bring anything? Children who don’t bring snacks to field trips aren’t playing by the rules. Don’t you agree, nee-san?”

“Up to 300 yen of snacks,” Yuika lightly tapped on the pochette hanging from her shoulder.

“Exactly. Also, field trips...”

“Aren’t over until you get home.”

“Perfect,” Hiroyuki nodded with a smile. “Man, I really have an amazing sister. How amazing, you ask? So amazing I wanna bathe with her.”

“Very well,” Yuika nodded repeatedly. “Let’s wash each other off.”

“Um, sorry,” Touko hurriedly butted in, “can I get some travel sickness medicine?”

Touko was lucky. Despite having screwed up, despite having fled, she managed to come back to it. Well, that's because this is a novel; reality isn't so easy. Failures remain as such until death, and escapes keep picking at one's pride until the very last moment. Regrets don't go away. They are thousands of times more painful than being actively destroyed. For the moment, Touko was freed from having to shoulder all the emotions resulting from her pessimistic actions being the direct cause of a disaster. However, she couldn't be careless. After all, there was no way all parts of the world were working to serve her. The world only goes around via the discord between causality and coincidences. Since she couldn't escape from that inner working, she had no guarantee collapse wasn't around the corner. Just like how her chance for a re-challenge appeared so abruptly, an infernal hell might very well come down on her without any warning. No amount of effort can pull her off to safety. Either way, it's quite presumptuous to think you can do something about a force that works in ways totally unrelated to you.

'For a while, these thoughts depressed me. It wasn't because I was upset by their deaths, but because I became aware of the same fickle conditions that kept me alive now but that would also kill me at some point. I thought I'd glimpsed a broad outline of the true shape of things.'

—Kajii Motojiro, *Winter Flies*, translation by Stephen Dodd.

Chapter 6

The Investigator

Once again, the boat arrived at the island late at night. Our group of three got off the boat, luggage in hands. Actually, Hiroyuki was carrying Yuika's luggage, so that expression isn't really fitting. Returning to the island awakened a strange feeling in Touko. One hard to put into words (since those are, after all, feeble and weak constructs), but a strange one for sure. That feeling only grew stronger at her every step on the land, at the slightest stroke of wind grazing her, at the faintest sound of waves reaching her ears, at every time her eyes captured the hazy sight of the tower hiding in the darkness.

"Mhm? What's wrong, Touko-chan?" Hiroyuki, leading the group, turned around and asked. "You can wait all you want, nothing good's gonna happen, you know? Oh, or did you change your mind and feel like taking one yourself?! One of these stupidly-large suitcases occupying my hands?" he said, shaking the suitcases that were indeed as large as advertised.

"Not at all," not in a headspace for his jokes, Touko gave a half-hearted reply and hastened her walking pace.

"What a wicked personality you have. How can you see such a frail gentleman suffering and not offer a helping hand? Seriously, please, take one of them. They're, like, really heavy, I'm not joking. What the hell did nee-san put into them... Please. I beg of you. I implore you."

"Hiroyuki-san, do you want me to carry them?" asked Yuika, who was standing by Hiroyuki's side like a shadow, in a voice so quiet a puff of wind could erase it.

"Sorry but I'm not letting you, nee-san. This isn't the kind of favor I can ask from someone who has literally never held anything heavier than chopsticks."

"I can do it. I can hold things as heavy as dictionaries."

"But bowling balls are too heavy for you, right?"

"Yes."

"Heh..." Hiroyuki chuckled, astonished. He really was. Touko was too.

Our group of two astonished youngsters and a young lady who didn't know astonishment reached the shed Touko had been using when monitoring the man. The indescribable emotion eroding her from within grew again in intensity the moment she took a step inside. Hiroyuki turned on his flashlight. He then muttered, *Okay, time to set up*, and produced thick, black curtains out of a suitcase, which he installed on the windows before hanging a lamp off the ceiling. A gentle light illuminated the room. Touko noticed the binoculars, blanket, and bread packaging abandoned by the window and saw her mood dwindle lower.

"What a tiny shed," Hiroyuki commented, taking three people's worth of floor cushions out of the suitcases. They seemed to have everything. "It's so dusty, too. Looks like there might be bugs and maybe even rats."

"It's smaller than our kennel at home," Yuika said before taking a seat on her knees on one cushion.

"Enough complaints for now. Let's treat this like a camping trip," Hiroyuki produced a bag of beef jerky. "Ah, nee-san, you want some too?"

"No thanks..." Yuika resolutely shook her head. "It will just tire my jaw."

"Hey, upper-class siblings, aren't you having too much fun?" Touko asked along with a sigh, glaring at them.

"Yeah," Hiroyuki replied nonchalantly. "You too, stop standing there and join us, Touko-chan. Put down your luggage wherever, I don't mind. Right, do you like beef jerky?"

"I don't want it!"

"Why are you so mad?"

"I don't know."

"Ahh...my bad. You see, I'm not popular with girls, surprisingly," Hiroyuki opened the bag. "Most girls just get angry when talking with me for a bit. I'm really not sure why," he looked up at the lamp he'd set up. "I wonder what that's all about. I still don't get it."

“You should keep your mouth shut, then,” Touko put down her luggage and stole the bag of beef jerky from Hiroyuki’s hands. “Do you have any more snacks?”

“Eh? We do, why?” Hiroyuki moved his eyes from the lamp to Touko.

“This alone costs more than 300 yen, right?” Touko checked the price tag. “I’m confiscating the jerky.”

“Ehhh. Come on, this isn’t a Super Hitoshi-kun figurine, you can’t say ‘holefiscate’ that lightly.²”

“I’m serious here,” she sat on a cushion and took out a strip of jerky from the bag. “So please stop making fun of me. It pisses me off.” She bit into the stripe and pulled on it. *Snap*.

“Oh please, this hurts. I wasn’t making fun of you at all. Why would I prepare a boat and travel to an island with you as a joke? We’re serious too. Don’t get that wrong.”

“Well, sure, in that sense I bet you’re serious, but—”

“Um...” Yuika turned to Touko, her phantom-like face illuminated by the ceiling lamp. “Does that taste good?”

“Eh? Ah, err, the jerky?” Touko was a bit flustered. This was the first time she’d exchanged actual words with Yuika. “...I mean, it tastes pretty normal.”

“May I get one, if you do not mind?”

Her voice was like the flapping of a sparrow.

“Sure...”

Touko took out another stripe of jerky from the bag and handed it to her. Yuika stared at the long, brown strip of dried meat for a while, then slowly

² The quiz TV show *Sekai Fushigi Hakken* (Discovery of the World’s Mysteries) has a point system where participants bet Hitoshi-kun figurines on their answers. When someone gets a question wrong, the figurines they’ve waged get ‘holefiscated’ (‘Boschute’ in Japanese, a portmanteau word between ‘Bosshu,’ meaning ‘to confiscating,’ and ‘dust chute,’ a Wasei-eigo term designating garbage chutes). By the way, a Super Hitoshi-kun figurine is worth three Hitoshi-kun figurines.

brought it to her mouth. She worked it inside her mouth for a time, but eventually gave up and took it out. She then, still inexpressive, said, *It's pretty hard, huh.* With just these words, Touko's astonishment peaked.

"Okay, it's pretty late today, let's get to sleep," Hiroyuki suggested. "We're getting to work tomorrow. Don't laze around, get to sleep. It's better for your beauty, health, and lifespan." He then took out two sleeping bags out of a suitcase. "Nee-san, I think you had the green one and me the red? Oh, did you bring yours, Touko-chan?"

"I'm good, I'll use the blanket over there," she pointed at the blanket by the window.

"Ugh, I don't recommend it. You should absolutely disinfect it first. I bet it has a bunch of dust and ticks."

"I'm a commoner, I have a strong constitution."

"Wow, color me jealous. I'm from the upper-class and I can't even do a back hip circle."

Hiroyuki spread his sleeping bag and entered it. An urge to crush that giant red bagworm with her soles coursed through Touko, but she somehow repressed it. She then decided to sleep to forget the irritating feeling that was eating at her from the inside. She picked up the blanket and flapped it. She then wrapped it around herself and lay down. It was indeed a bit dusty, but she bluffed her way through it. The back of her head hurting against the hard floor, she sat up in search of something to use as a pillow, spotted Yuika undoing the back button on her jacket, and shouted involuntarily, *Woah, what are you doing!?*

"Changing into my pajamas," Yuika answered, her Noh mask intact. "My clothes would get wrinkles if I slept like this..."

Pajamas? Huh? Yuika kept undoing the buttons, completely ignorant of Touko's feelings. The white skin on her right shoulder got exposed. Her brassiere's strap would probably have been visible if not for her hair covering it. Taken over by a sudden realization, Touko shot a look at Hiroyuki, who was sleeping, uncaring. Yuika removed her jacket and unstrapped her brassiere.

Her white skin and black hair illuminated by the dim light from the lamp were unnecessarily beautiful. Yuika put on her pajamas, seemingly paying no heed to Touko's gaze. She then put on a conic nightcap on her head and leisurely entered her sleeping bag. Finally, she said *Good night* in a voice like a kitten's yawn.

The next morning, predictably, Touko was the first one to wake up. Mornings were really cold in October. Half-asleep, she pulled the blanket up to her chest, but quickly realized she had no time to be doing this and sat up. She stretched. Her joints hurt. Hiroyuki and Yuika were still sleeping. They were both fully inside their sleeping bags. Yuika had even plunged so deep Touko could only see the tip of her nightcap. Touko ignored these nonchalant siblings, turned off the ceiling lamp that was still on, and swung open the thick, black curtains obstructing the window. A piercing light penetrated the shed. She looked down to check her digital watch. 7:18. Touko gazed outside the window as she rubbed her eyes. The shed with sticky walls stood straight ahead. She grabbed the binoculars by reflex, and observed that shed's window. The black desk did have the laptop, but still not the man. He was still missing. Still vanished from that closed shed.

"Heeehh~, hoo howhin hoahn," Hiroyuki yelped while yawning. "Mnnn. ...Err, to translate, that meant 'Good morning, Touko-chan.'"

"Good morning," Touko bowed.

"Ahh, it's so damn cold," Hiroyuki complained as he squirmed inside his bag. "I should've brought a stove."

"You're not saying this as a joke, are you?"

"If I get serious, I could cover this whole island with stoves."

"Um, can I ask something?" Touko put down the binoculars on the window's rim. "Why did you take me to this island? Is your sister right and you just do things like that for your personal amusement?"

"'Course not," he crawled out of his bag. "I don't have that much time to spare, and I'm not a weirdo either," he then stroked his bed-hair-ridden

head. "I felt like offering you a helping hand since you seemed to be suffering. That's all, I swear."

"I see...thank you."

Obviously, she didn't believe him.

"Anyway, aren't you hungry? I brought cup ramen, let's eat that. The investigation can wait a bit. Oh, I have miso, salt, and tonkotsu flavors, which one do you want, Touko-chan? I hear that girls are careful with calories so I guess you should take—"

"The tonkotsu one."

"Huh, unexpected. Right, I should wake up the boss now. Nee-san, get up. Come on, it's morning."

Hiroyuki tapped on the sleeping bag. No reaction whatsoever. He tapped again. The shoulder area saw a slight movement, but still no sign of waking up. He plunged both hands inside the sleeping bag. After a brief confrontation, he successfully dragged her out. Yuika, grabbed under her armpits, was resolutely shaking her head, covered down to her eyes by the nightcap, over and over. She then lowered the cap even further. A strained smile on his face, Hiroyuki proceeded to take the nuisance off her head. It exposed Yuika's barely-awoken face, which actually wasn't much different than her usual one. That was probably due to her being always half-asleep. Yuika's muttered "Good morning" was so quiet someone 50 meters away wouldn't hear it even passed through a megaphone. The three of them then boiled water, cooked the cup ramen, and ate them.

"Touko-chan," Hiroyuki said while smoking his post-breakfast cigarette. "From here on you'll be acting alone."

"...Eh?" Touko, who was lying on the floor now messy with sleeping bags and blankets, raised her head and looked at Hiroyuki.

"I mean, it makes sense. Our role was to bring you to this island, not to become detective buddies and investigate together. You're aware of that, right?" He erased his cigarette in the ashtray. "Also—and I might have already said this—you have to solve your problems on your own, otherwise

there's no meaning to it. Some wise guy said that the true problems aren't the ones at hand but those that lie ahead."

"Who said that?"

"Me. Still, tell us if you need help. We'll do anything we can with all our might, as long as it's something we can help with. You'll help too, nee-san, won't you?"

Yuika, still in her pajamas and licking on her morning chocolate, silently shook her head vertically. Her long hair fell on her face.

Touko stood up and stepped out.

It was currently ten in the morning.

Time to start the second round.

“Why are you here?” Kumagai asked, staring at the girl standing past his front door with fed-up eyes. That was a perfectly-reasonable question.

“To get my peace of mind back, of course,” Touko answered in a clear-cut tone. She knew that showing the slightest bit of weakness or lack of confidence was fatal. “That’s why I’m back. I don’t want to hear any complaints from you on this subject.”

“So arrogant. I don’t care about your peace of mind. Go home.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I will. But only after finding your little brother,” Touko looked straight into Kumagai’s eyes. That alone was already an impressive feat for a fifteen-year-old girl. “You still haven’t found him, have you?”

“He’s not on this island.”

“Why do you think so?”

“The police combed through the island and didn’t find anything. He has to have left the island, then. He must’ve ordered a boat to pick him up and left, like you.”

“How can you talk like it’s not your business? Your little brother disappeared, you realize?” she got irrationally angry.

“What of it?” A gleam appeared in the back of Kumagai’s eyes, behind his glasses. “It’s certainly not an outsider’s business. It has nothing to do with you. Go home and attend school for once, test-taker.”

“I told you not to complain about my peace of mind,” Touko spat out these words before turning on her heels. “Just you watch, I’ll find your little brother—for my own sake.”

“Do whatever.”

The sound of a door being slammed shut reached her ears. Unperturbed, Touko started walking away. *Kumagai doesn’t get it at all. He doesn’t know the fear and confusion that comes from someone vanishing before your eyes. I mean...he doesn’t even believe in my testimony, I bet. He must be coping by classifying it as a misconception on my part or simple negligence. Fuck. However,*

since internal frustration cannot result in progress, she forcefully changed her focus. *I'm leaving the vanishing trick for later, I need to gather intel right now.* Touko headed for the heart of the island. She then entered the candy shop where she'd bought Tirol Chocolate and a bottle of coke from the last time she visited the island. *Excuse me!* Hearing Touko's greeting, the lady who was polishing the register literally jumped out of her seat in surprise. *Woah! Why are you still here?!* Touko put on a troubled smile before answering, *I wonder, myself.* Then, after changing the subject some more, she asked about the case. The lady reciprocated with a furious stream of words: *Oh that was so awful you can't imagine, the first big case we've had in a long time, the police came over and filled the island...okay maybe not, but there were a bunch of them and it was so intimidating [...] well they didn't find him in the end, but yeah I wonder what happened to him, the police said he was using a boat but the cargo ship wasn't scheduled for that day and nobody used the fishing boats by the port.* The lady was done speaking. Next, Touko asked what kind of person the man was. The answer she got was very succinct: *Can't say he left much of an impression.* Touko left the store and entered the diner. An old man wiping the counter and a young man who appeared to be a customer looked at her and voiced their surprise. *What the heck!? Why are you still here?* Touko felt like she was talking to parrots but kept it to herself. She yet again changed the subject however she could, and quickly got to asking the same question—the one regarding the case. The old man and the customer began talking with a lot of enthusiasm: *Oh yeah, that sure was something, I'm not really sure what happened but a bunch of officers came over and looked at every nook and cranny of the island, you don't see that every day [...] so some people suggested that if nothing came up with that many people searching, he must've fallen into the water or something, so they sent divers down there but still nothing.* They were done speaking. Next, Touko asked what kind of person the man was, again. The answer was just as succinct: *Beats me, I didn't know him well.* Touko figured she had asked the wrong people. *These people probably didn't have many chances to interact with the man...I should really stop calling him that...with Kumagai Naoto. The island is small, sure,*

but it's not like everyone is friends with everyone. Touko left the diner. As she was thinking about her next move, she spotted a small gathering of elementary schoolers in front of the candy shop. They seemed to be buying drinks at a rusty vending machine. Touko approached them. *Hey guys!* The kids then surrounded Touko, pure joy and surprise decorating their faces. *Wow, what are you doing here? When did you come back?* Touko gave half-hearted answers, then asked about Kumagai Naoto. However, no actual intel came out of it.

"Sorry, we don't know much about Kumagai-san's little brother," the tallest boy from the group acted as a representative. "Oh yeah, do you want to ask my brother? He was in the same class as Kumagai-san's little brother."

Ohh, nice one, boy, something good might happen to you. Touko agreed to meet the boy's brother. He lived in one of the houses near the harbor. The boy and his friends entered through the front door. Touko followed after them. The brother in question was reading in his bedroom. "Eh?! Huh? What do you want?" the man got visibly flustered upon seeing Touko. She paid no heed to that and started asking questions: "Uh, I'm looking into Kumagai Naoto-san. You two were in the same class, right?" "Oh, err, kinda." "Can I ask a few questions if you don't mind?" "No but like, what's your deal?" *Shut up.* "Like I just said, I'm currently looking into Naoto-san. You were in the same class as him, right? Weren't you?" "No, I was, but..." "Okay, alright. So, could you tell me anything about Naoto-san?" "Anything... Like what, for example?" "Uhh, like what kind of person he was." "I think he was pretty normal?" "Did he have any hobbies?" "Dunno, but I doubt it." "Did he seem to be struggling about anything?" "I couldn't tell you, honestly. I haven't seen him since we graduated." "Why do you think he disappeared from the island?" "Beats me." "Any ideas on where he could have gone?" "Not really, no." "Please answer seriously." An urge to punch the man in the face coursed through Touko. "No I mean, I wasn't close to him at all," he explained, panicking. "Then introduce me to someone who got along with Naoto-san." "Ehh, not sure he had any friends." "Huh? What, was he ostracized by the class?" "No, no. Err,

anyway I don't know anything about him." "How... I mean, weren't you in the same class?" "People aren't friends with all their classmates, are they?" "How big were the classes in the school you went to?" "We had six people. By the way, there were 65 students in the whole school. Well, it does both elementary and middle education." "Then shouldn't you be pretty close?" "That's not how it works," the man chuckled. "But the smaller the class, the more chances you have to know about your classmates, right?" "Pretty much." "Then, even if you didn't care about him, it would be weird if you didn't know a minimum about Naoto-san." "...You might have a point, but I can't do anything about what I don't know. I haven't spoken to him a single time." *You must be joking.* "But there were only six people in your class, right? There's just no way you never spoke with each other." "Come to think, I've almost never seen him talk with anyone. He doesn't have anything to him."

That statement was more than enough to put an end to Touko's questioning. *He has nothing.* These were the same words that used to enter Touko's brain while monitoring. Touko thanked him and left that house. A slight headache rang in her intermittently. Touko stopped anyone passing by in the street and asked them to tell her anything they knew about Naoto. However, the answers were always brief and disappointing. "Beats me." "I wasn't really familiar with him." "Never talked to him." They were all like this. It wouldn't be strange to get similar results in the middle of Tokyo—rather, that would be normal. However, this wasn't Tokyo. It was the heart of a small island inhabiting around 500 people. A diorama-like, packed island where no neighbors could not know each other. Touko experimented with other questions. Q: Have you seen an old man riding a red bike on the island? The answers she got were way more substantial. A: "Oh him, he's called Tsukamoto-san. He's a bit of a landmark." "You ever got to ride on that bike? It's so cool, well the painting at least." "Tsukamoto-san is a school janitor. I think he said this would be his 40th year." "Actually, his wife passed away a few years ago, and he's been losing it ever since. Now he calls everyone

‘Reiko.’ Ah, that’s the name of his wife, by the way.” She changed her question. Q: What kind of person is Kumagai Masato? A: “He’s quiet and doesn’t get jokes, but he’s a pretty good guy I’d say.” “He lost his parents young, you see. His current job is what his father used to do.” “Kuma-chan’s wholesale business is a real lifesaver. Since nowadays it costs money just to throw out garbage. And even if we illegally dumped them, with how the tides work around here, they’d just come back to our beaches.” “Masato-san is a bit scary with his gloomy aura. Also because of his lame glasses.” She returned to the original question. Q: What kind of person is Kumagai Masato’s little brother? A: “Beats me.” “I wasn’t really familiar with him.” “Never talked to him.”

Hey, hey, come on! Touko thought. People on this island are definitely normal. At least enough not to be completely uninterested in others. Then why is everyone’s impressions of Naoto so inexistent? Are they being silenced? No, it didn’t look that way. Their reactions were that of pure indifference. But how is this possible? Touko left the town, an ambiguous impatience welling up inside her. She went around the hill and reached the tower. The vertical, concrete-made building. Touko stepped inside with no precise goal in mind. The sunlight couldn’t come in, rendering the insides dim. The air was heavy and unsanitary, further harming Touko’s psyche. She climbed to the highest floor in that same mood. She could see the sky, the land, and the town through one of the big windows. An empty island. A tiny island. 500 humans living on it. Their bonds. Touko leaned on the frame while thinking about presence. She had a classmate with a weak presence herself. *His name was...Kimura-kun I think? A short guy with a buzzcut.* Touko didn’t know Kimura-kun’s hobbies. She didn’t remember Kimura-kun’s voice. She didn’t know what subjects Kimura-kun was good at. She didn’t know the school he was aiming for, who he had a crush on, what kind of music he listened to, or anything of the sort. After all, there wasn’t a single thing connecting Touko and Kimura-kun—he was a dispensable individual in Touko’s life. *Do people on this island see Kumagai Naoto in the same way? ...No, that can’t be. You can’t put a school and an island in*

the same basket. Also, Kumagai Naoto was seen with indifference not just by his classmates, but by all the locals. In that sense, he exceeds Kimura-kun. Can really no one say anything about Kumagai Naoto on this island? She took a peek below the window and suddenly recalled Misaki. By association, she then recalled Taki. And her conversation with these two. Touko ran down the stairs. *Right, they talked about Kumagai Naoto. I forgot what they said, but they talked about him. But where do they live? No idea, I'll head for the beach. Nice timing.* She spotted Taki picking up detritus. She approached Taki, her lungs running out of air, and called out to her.

“...Huh? You still haven't gone home?” Taki froze upon seeing Touko.

“Well, uh, there are some forthright circumstances behind that.” She didn't know what forthright meant. “Um, err, ahh,” she had trouble breathing. “I want to ask a few—”

“Mooom!” She spotted a girl running at them in the distance. *That's...Misaki. Eh?! Huh, mom?* “Mom, look, look what I found,” Misaki ignored Touko's confusion and showed Taki something. A dazzling, circular object; a ring. “I'm so damn lucky to have found this. The world must be a really awesome place for things like this to land here.” She then glanced at Touko and bowed. “Ah, nice to meet you. Um...oh, are you Kobayashi Touko-san, by any chance?”

She had been served tea but couldn't get in the mood to drink it.

"...She forgets everything?"

"Her brain," Taki stuck a finger against her temple, "is a bit faulty."

"Is it a disease...or something like that?"

Taki took a seat across from Touko. She then nodded with a slight movement of the head, and added, *And it's progressive*. Touko didn't know how to react, so she forced herself to drink the tea she hadn't been able to touch on yet. Taki rested both elbows on the table and covered her white hair with her palms. She then muttered: *It's probably my fault for giving birth at such an old age...*

"Sorry for the rude question, but how old are you, Taki-san?"

"Wow, yeah you're really rude."

"Ah, I'm really sor—"

"I'm joking," Taki warped the wrinkles around her mouth. "Here's a hint then: I gave birth to Misaki when I was 53."

"I honestly thought she was your granddaughter."

"Can't blame you."

"Your husband is...?"

"He passed away. Along with the Kumagais' parents."

"Eh..."

"They died the year I bore Misaki," she said with a heavy sigh, her eyes staring in the distance. "We've always been close friends with the Kumagai household. Before Masato-kun and Naoto-kun were even born. We weren't of the same generation, but for some reason we got along really well with that couple. The four of us would go to Kyoto every summer. *Every* summer. And that year too, we planned on going, but..." Taki gently poked at her belly. "I had Misaki in me, so I stayed home. My husband and the Kumagai parents went by themselves, and their boat sank..."

"What happened to Kumagai-san? There were still kids, right?"

“Masato-kun was about ten, and Naoto-kun was still in the single digits. So I took them in and raised them. Though they’re independent now. It was really tough back then. One elderly lady taking care of two kids and a baby, it’s nonsense. Still, in the end we kind of made it work thanks to the help of the island’s people.”

A voice said, *I’m coming in*, from behind the sliding screen. Misaki entered the room with snacks. She put them down in front of Touko while directing a bright smile at her.

“I’m really sorry, Touko-chan,” she said in a cheerful voice. “Looks like I forgot everything.”

“Ah, yeah...”

She didn’t know how to reply to that.

“Um, so how about we become friends all over again? Please?”

“Eh... Oh, yeah,” Touko put up a clumsy smile and replied. Hearing that, Misaki’s eyes lit up like a child seeing a panda at the zoo for the first time, and she made V signs with her hands. She was wearing the ring from earlier on her right hand’s middle finger.

“That’s all well and good, but did you finish your homework?” Taki asked. “I’m not letting you play until you do.”

“Ah!” she pulled away her V signs. “Ughh, I actually forgot. Errr...then Touko-chan, let’s play together once I’m done, okay?”

She then left without waiting for an answer.

“Misaki isn’t any different than other people,” Taki started to mutter after seeing Misaki off. “She can study like anyone else. She can even memorize things fine. The thing is...her brain forgets things at a higher rate than most, and on a larger scale. For example, let’s say you learn an English term and don’t use it for a while, you’ll forget it, won’t you? It’s the same principle. Everyone experiences that.”

“But...”

“But normally you don’t forget your friends’ faces. You don’t forget where you live. You don’t forget how to turn on the TV. Even if you did, it would be an extremely-rare occurrence.”

“Yeah...”

“But Misaki forgets these things. She keeps forgetting more and more and more. So she’ll probably forget about me, and even about her ailment. And she’ll end up an invalid.”

“But... Is there no treatment?”

“Doctors have looked at her, but they all threw in the towel,” the wrinkles around her mouth were trembling. “There’s apparently no hope for recovery. So I opted to let her be free while her memory is still functional. That’s why I don’t have her hospitalized. She didn’t want to stay there either. Though I’m not sure if she remembers about that to this day.”

“How much time does she have left until she forgets everything?” Touko only realized how cruel her question was after having mouthed it.

“Who knows. It might happen tomorrow. She might wake up and start asking ‘Who am I?’ It’s certainly not impossible. She’s doomed to forget it all, eventually.”

Sorry to Kumagai Naoto, but I have higher priorities.

“But you know, that’s where you gotta be positive.” Misaki, however, was cheerful. “Being forgetful, on the other hand, means you also forget about all the bad things too.”

Touko and Misaki kept strolling aimlessly; they were now in front of the tower. It was two in the afternoon. The sun was peeking at them from behind the tip of the tower. The wind had begun growing cold. Their hair freely fluttered.

“But you also forget the things you absolutely want to remember, don’t you? Like you also...forget about your friends, right?” It wasn’t in Touko’s intention to blame her, but she couldn’t resist asking that.

“It’s okay. I just have to become their friends all over again,” Misaki was smiling. “Just like I did with you, Touko-chan.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Let’s go in!” Misaki grabbed Touko’s hand and pulled her inside the tower. Touko felt the cold ring touching her skin. “The sight from up there is amazing, madam!”

“Huh, is it, madam...”

Interacting with Misaki was a struggle ever since she learned about her memory disorder. Touko loathed herself for being so puny. Misaki was having the fun of her life climbing the stairs while pulling on Touko’s hand. The two of them arrived at the highest floor and looked down through a window frame. Before them sprawled a measly, yet vast world.

“Even if I forget this scenery,” Misaki said, “I can savor it again by coming back here and looking at it. That’s good enough.”

“True.”

Good enough my ass.

“But you see...how should I put it? Like, unless you have the exact same experience all over, feelings don’t, err...you just don’t end up feeling the same way,” Misaki joined her hands, restlessly. “Feelings are entirely dependent

on the situation, so you can never guarantee you'll react in the same way as before, can you? I'm super afraid of that."

"Yeah, it would be pretty terrible if you forgot about the person you love."

"More than just pretty terrible!"

"...Sorry."

"Geez, no need to apologize all formally," Misaki tapped on Touko's shoulder. "Apart from love at first sight, it takes an accumulation of experiences to fall in love with someone, doesn't it? It's not something you can grasp at once like scenery. A slightly different timing might even get you to hate that person... So yeah, that's scary."

"Say, Misaki-chan." *What should I do?* "Um..."

"You see, I was trying really hard to remember you for a while."

"...Eh?"

"But I couldn't do it," Misaki lightly shook her head. "It's a mess in my head. The strings in there are super entangled. I bet I have memories of you somewhere. But it's such a mess I have no idea what they're connected to. It's like yesterday is directly followed by the day after tomorrow, that's how it works. So it seems like I can't remember you."

"Oh, it's okay, really... Just look, there's not much to remember about me," that was a great awful attempt at cheering her up.

"But I don't want to forget about you anymore, Touko-chan..." Misaki whispered. "I really don't."

"Can you never remember something you've forgotten?"

"Uhh, I've tried my best many times I swear, but it looks pretty hopeless. I know there's no way to keep me from forgetting, but...I wonder if there's a way to help me remember things..."

"How about writing each day's events in minute detail?"

"I've already tried that," Misaki answered with a chuckle. "But nope. How to put it; it felt like I was reading someone else's diary. Just reading about events never made me remember them."

"I see..."

Re-installing a brain seems pretty impossible.

“...Oh!” Misaki suddenly shouted. “Got a brilliant idea!” She then clasped her hands together. “Let’s try to do it with a word association game.”

“A what?”

“Like...mhm, uhhh,” Misaki stuck out her right hand in front of Touko’s eyes. She then pointed at the ring on her middle finger with her left hand. “First, you put this on,” she said, removing her ring and handing it to Touko.

“Err...”

Touko took a look at the ring gleaming inside the palm of her hand.

“So now, if I ever forget about you, Touko-chan, just show me this ring. With some luck, it might act as a firestarter and reactivate all my memories of you.”

Touko observed the ring. It had a simple design; no decoration or motifs. Its gleaming, silver surface had a few scratches. It must’ve overcome many hardships before landing by the shore.

“Got it,” Touko accepted the plan and put the ring on her right hand’s ring finger. It wasn’t a matter of possibilities, but of spirit. “Remember me without fail.”

“No worries. I’m pretty good at memorizing stuff. Uh, please don’t comment on that. It’ll just make me sad.”

“Don’t be,” Touko laughed. “It’s okay, you’ll do a great job. So there’s nothing to be sad about.”

“I hope it goes as smoothly as you say...”

“Of course it will,” Touko delivered a gentle chop on Misaki’s head.

“Augh!” a pitiful yelp escaped Misaki’s mouth.

“It’s alright. Everything is absolutely entirely alright, okay?” Touko said as if to convince herself. “You’ll remember me for sure, so don’t worry too much.”

“...Yeah,” Misaki nodded again and again. “Right, I will. I’ll remember you, I can do it.”

“Of course. Okay, let’s talk about something more bright,” Touko said. It wasn’t an attempt to revitalize Misaki’s sunken feelings. She simply couldn’t bear that mood any longer. “For example...I know, the person you have a crush on.” *The fundamentals are best in times like this.*

“...Eh!? Ghh!?” Misaki reacted more fiercely than expected. “The person I have a c-crush on?! That’s too sudden! Woah, woah, no way! Nope, instant nope,” she was visibly embarrassed. “I’m not gonna.”

“So who is it? Come on, tell me.”

“Ehhh, but it’s embarrassing...”

“I promise I won’t tell anyone.”

“Hm....mhm. Really?”

“I swear, really.”

“You won’t tell mom either?”

“I won’t tell anyone.”

“You see...” Misaki looked down, embarrassed. “I like Masato-kun.”

It was already past six in the afternoon by the time she returned to the shed. She remembered Kumagai Naoto after parting with Misaki and went around searching for a good source of information. However, to no avail. Under the shock of learning about Misaki's disorder, she had also completely forgotten to ask Taki about that. *Eh, I still have tomorrow.* Today, tomorrow, and the day after, Kobayashi Touko would be Kobayashi Touko. Her position relative to herself wouldn't budge. The shed's window was still covered with black curtains, and even though she couldn't see through them, she could easily imagine what was waiting inside. She opened the door. The shed's interior was a happy-go-lucky world, thoroughly insensitive towards Touko's sentiments. The entire room smelled of curry. Hiroyuki was eating curry rice in-between gulps of his canned beer. Yuika was nibbling on a snack while rubbing her sleepy eyes. *I swear, these two...*

"The heck are you doing!?"

"Eh? What, isn't curry rice the classic camping dish? Did I screw up?" Hiroyuki washed away the curry in his mouth with beer. "First you eat curry, and then everyone sits around a superdreadnought's afterburner—"

"A campfire."

"Same difference. But yeah, typically you follow that with a courage test, and then everyone gets inside their tents where they talk about their crushes."

"Houston, can hear me?"

"Oh, don't you want some as well, Touko-chan? I was aiming for a mild spiciness but it ended up pretty tame."

Hiroyuki walked up to the kitchen, filled a plate with curry and rice, and handed it to Touko. Touko threw the plate at Hiroyuki's face, dug her fist into his screeching mouth, and followed it with an ax kick to his back while vacantly staring at his broken teeth—at least she planned on doing that, but the spicy fragrance emanating from the curry stimulated her stomach, so she ate

dinner instead of carrying it out. It was surprisingly good. She ended up finishing two servings. *Nee-san only ate a spoonful, just so you know*, Hiroyuki teased her, to which she replied she was in a growth period in an attempt to justify her appetite. Yuika turned her Noh-mask-face to Touko and told her, *Please grow up healthy.*

“Dinner’s done, I’ll do the dishes,” Hiroyuki headed to the kitchen, a cigarette still in mouth. “You look kinda down, Touko-chan, you okay? Want some beer?”

“You shouldn’t drink alcohol. It’ll mess up your stomach,” Touko said as she lay down.

“That’s my line, Miss Glutton. Can you even move like that? We’re gonna investigate the room Kumagai Naoto disappeared from once I’m done washing these.”

“Eh?”

“Good grief... You can’t keep treating this like a game forever.”

“You’re the last person I want to hear this from.”

“You got me good, yeah. Swell, all’s well.” *He’s definitely making fun of me.* “C’mon Touko-chan, don’t slouch like a cow right after a big meal; get up. You’ll seriously turn into a cow if you fall asleep now. There are worthless women out there whom I don’t care if they turn into cows, but that’s no reason.”

“Hiroyuki-san...” Hearing Yuika’s voice from behind, she turned around; she was wearing pajamas. “Good night,” she said before crawling into her sleeping bag.

“Huh... The heck?” The cigarette fell out of Hiroyuki’s mouth into the sink. “Who the hell changes into their pajamas *while* I’m talking about how we’re going to investigate outside once I’m done with the dishes, nee-san?”

Yuika pointed at herself in silence, then dived deeper into the bag. Only the pompom at the tip of her nightcap was visible through the bag’s opening.

“It’s not even seven o’clock,” Touko said, checking her watch. “Is your sister always like that?”

“Not really. Like once every four days,” Hiroyuki said while making a sponge bubbly. “Come on nee-san, wake up~.”

However, no response.

“Can you hear me~?”

Still no response.

“Please wake up.”

Not the slightest response.

“You’ll turn into a cow if you sleep for too long.”

Hearing these words, Yuika, who had maintained a total lack of reaction up till that point, hurriedly crawled out of her bag. She then took her nightcap off to show she was fully awake. *Does she have some bad memories with cows?*

“Morning, nee-san,” Hiroyuki smiled. “An early riser today, huh.”

Yuika put down her nightcap on the sleeping bag and replied, *I wasn’t sleeping. Then why are you wearing pajamas?* Hiroyuki enquired, maliciously, to which Yuika answered *A simple mistake* while taking off her front buttons. Touko sighed. *Why is she so fast to undress in front of others?*

Once Yuika fully awoke from her somnolent state and the dishes were done, the three of them started investigating Kumagai Naoto’s domicile. *My stomach is so full... But if there’s delicious food before my eyes, even if I know it exceeds my capacity, I’ll eat it anyway; that’s how women work,* Touko selfishly claimed to feel better about herself. The sticky shed’s interior. There was still nothing; the room was beautifully minimalistic. Only decorated with a chair, a laptop, a desk, a desk light, and a dresser. Hiroyuki snorted. That must’ve been his review of the room. Yuika was staring blankly at the ceiling. She might still have been sleepy.

“He could at least have hung a poster somewhere,” Hiroyuki commented as he began touring the room. “Not even a thumb tack’s hole,” he then knocked on a wall whose wallpaper was starting to loosen. “I don’t see any signs of a hidden passage anywhere for the moment.” He opened the door leading to the room that worked both as a bathroom and a toilet, and started

checking it. "If there was, the police would've long since found them anyway."

"Does that mean he really vanished from a locked room...?"

"Mhmm, rather than vanish..."

"What is it?"

"Rather..." Hiroyuki threw Touko a dubious side look. "Yeah, rather..."

"Come on, what is it? Just say it once and for all."

"Say, Touko-chan," Hiroyuki looked back ahead, "are you the type that gets wildly wrong impressions?"

"Huh?"

"Like, are you under the impression that the kanji for ridge (稜) is written '綾,' that George Asakura and George Akiyama are the same person, or that Presley's 'Can't Help Falling in Love' is a Hi-Standards original..."

"I have no clue what the heck you're talking about."

"Yeah. I figured you wouldn't," Hiroyuki put on a bitter smile. "Then how about this? Are you under the impression that *Tekkaman Blade* is a one-episode story because of how different the artstyle of each —"

"I really couldn't care less, but is it even related to the case?"

"It greatly is, albeit surprisingly," Hiroyuki nodded with a straight face.

Touko waited for him to say more; however, he never tried to continue where he left off, and instead started ransacking the dresser and the space under the sink. *Is he telling me to think for myself? Or is he simply pretending to know?*

"Hiroyuki-san," Touko heard a voice as quiet as a kitten's sigh. It was Yuika's. "There is a bath," she said, pointing at the empty bathtub visible through the open door. "Should we take one?"

"...Eh?" Hiroyuki furrowed his eyebrows, perturbed. "Uh, wait, are you serious about doing that thing from yesterday?"

Yuika slowly nodded before muttering, *Let's wash each other.* She then made to open her front buttons.

“Wow wow wow wow!” Even Hiroyuki was panicking. “Stop. Stop it. Freeze these hands where they are, nee-san.”

After another slow nod, Yuika pulled her hands away from the buttons and blurted a tiny yawn. She then moved to a corner of the room with a sleepy gait.

“Your sister is a...she tries to undress at every occasion, huh.”

“And yet she’s quite chaste. 16 years and never had a boyfriend,” Hiroyuki let out a deep sigh. “Anyway, let’s get back to investigating, shall we?” Hiroyuki proposed, quickly walking up to the desk. He pushed the laptop’s power button, then clicked his tongue when he noticed the lack of battery and adapter. He started ransacking the drawers.

“Dah dah dah dahhhh,” suddenly, Hiroyuki sang a bizarre melody. “I found a key item, nyoro!”

He then showed Touko a photograph. It had been taken in front of the tower. Two people stood side by side.

“...Ah.”

Misaki and Taki.

“Pretty cute,” Hiroyuki was quick to make a remark. “Yeah, this girl is pretty nice. I like her childlike, innocent features; she pretty much has all the elements I require. Mhmm, a thousand thanks to Nessha Boy.³”

Nothing lewd, Yuika suddenly spoke out. Hiroyuki made excuses for himself in a hurry: *No I swear there was no indecent innuendo behind my words, I—*

Touko was still looking at the picture. Kumagai Naoto has a picture of Misaki. There’s nothing weird about it. They lost their parents at a young age. Taki acted like a mother to them. And she’s her daughter. They are basically family, but still unrelated. Feelings one can have for an unrelated woman... But Misaki likes Masato, not Naoto.

³ An adult magazine that mainly featured amateur submissions. It ran from 1990 to 2010, the year Tokyo Sanseisha, its publisher, stopped all activities after four consecutive years of being in the red.

Chapter 7

The Bystander

Second day of investigation.

Unfortunately, it was a rainy day. Rain was pouring down from the sky without leaving an inch of space open. It was still light for the time being, but there was no telling when the drizzling would gain in intensity. Also, it was cold due to the sun being hidden behind thick clouds. To top it off, bad weather always gave Touko headaches, so her condition had cleanly hit rock bottom. That being said, she couldn't take the day off either. She borrowed a folding umbrella adorned with embarrassing cartoony droplets from Yuika and headed out. She then called the school on the phone and asked for an interview. She had figured they would turn her down anyway because of privacy and whatnot, but surprisingly, they readily accepted. The staff member that dealt with her had repeated a few times, *Of course, it would be an honor to entertain a friend of Ketouin-san*, in a forcefully-welcoming tone. She had no proof and couldn't be bothered to check, but she nonetheless conjectured that Hiroyuki had made use of his connections. *He can rent a cargo boat; making a school comply should be in his wheelhouse*. Since her meeting was set for ten o'clock, she decided to ask around while waiting. But there was nobody in the fields, likely due to the rain, so she couldn't do that there. She entered the town, but the only people walking on a rainy morning were students headed for school. She asked a few children wearing raincoats some questions just in case, but obviously got nothing. She spotted a young man roughly Kumagai Naoto's age walking his dog and asked him, but he curtly answered he didn't know much about him. She left the town and went around the back. After walking a bit, holding the umbrella more firmly, she arrived at a tiny harbor with a few small fishing boats. The rusty hulls lulled along the incoming waves. *Oh yeah, I saw something similar out the window of the Tokyo monorail I boarded in elementary school*. Feeling like her name had been called, she raised her face and found a man with a towel on his head standing atop a boat. "Are you heading out to fish?!" "Don't be stupid, we've got a storm coming," he

replied in a vigorous tone. Fishermen and movers are always vigorous. “A storm?” Touko looked closely at the ocean. The surface was gray, reflecting the heavy clouds, but there was no agitation whatsoever. “Don’t bother, miss, you have no shot of seeing it.” “How rough will it become?” “A helluva lot.” “Um, I’m looking into Kumagai Naoto-san and...” “Huh? I know about Masato. We replaced this boat’s broadside the other day. So I went and brought the old one to him, and it fetched much higher than I—” “Thank you very much!” Touko turned on her heels.

She arrived at the school at five to ten. A man clutching his hands like he was making onigiri led her to the staff room. The clutching man invited Touko to sit down as he alternated between bowing and fondling his hands. He then sat across from her, behind the glass table, and handed Touko his business card. He was the school’s head teacher. The head teacher moved his eyes to a bundle of documents occupying a corner of the table, said *This is the entirety of Kumagai Naoto-kun’s report cards as well as the graduation albums from his grade*, and added, *Please look at them for as long as you desire*. Touko wanted to say, *No, I want to hear about him*, but stopped herself. She already knew what would come of it. Touko first grabbed the report cards from elementary school. She looked at the ‘Learning Environment’ section: Ratings out of five. Japanese: 4. Math: 3. Cooking: 3. Society: 3. P.E.: 2. Music: 3. Manual arts: 4. Home ecs.: 3. *Ugh, so normal, way too normal*. The second and third trimester results boasted similar numbers. She also checked the school activity section, but didn’t find anything interesting. The ‘Basic Learning Capabilities’ category had a check mark. Other than that...he had one for ingenuity, public spirit, and effort. Things like ambition and cheerfulness/liveliness were missing check marks across all his semesters. The ‘Message for the Family’ sections also only had very normal comments. Like, ‘A very serious personality.’ Or, ‘Knows how to be considerate.’ The negative side had recommendations like ‘Aim to be a bit more assertive’ and ‘Aim to speak more clearly.’ She also looked into his middle school cards, but the numbers and

words were almost identical. She then skimmed through one of the graduation albums. It had a picture taken during a lecture. “Ah, this is Naoto-kun in elementary school,” the head teacher pointed at a boy with a face that one would forget three seconds later. Next, the graduation anthology. Touko searched for the page featuring what Kumagai Naoto had written. *It proved impossible to get an idea of him from the outside. However, an essay must have at least one or two claims of his own...found it.* ‘Looking Back on my School Years.’ *What a commonplace title. I have a bad feeling about this.* “Looking back on my school years, the most memorable moment for me was the sports day in third year of middle school. I did the 100 meter race. I finished in fourth place. I’m not really good at sports, but this made for a fun memory. I wasn’t really good at studying. I was especially bad at English, and never managed to get over it. But I don’t need to study anymore, so I don’t actually mind. I’ve decided to work at the wholesale business my father was running before passing away after graduating. My brother is already working there. I want to quickly get good at it so I can be useful to everyone.” Touko’s bad feeling hit the bullseye. This essay didn’t reflect any of Kumagai Naoto’s personality. There wasn’t a single genuine word in it. It was a bundle of lies made up on the spot to be done with it. *I bet he didn’t remember crap from that sports day; he probably didn’t care that his English was bad; he didn’t even want to work at the wholesale business.* There was obviously nothing to glean from looking at this fake-looking essay. “Thank you for your time,” Touko thanked the head teacher and canceled her plans of investigating the school. *I mean, fuck this.*

When she left the school, the rain had grown more intense. *Rat-a-tat-a-tat.* Droplets made loud sounds upon hitting her umbrella. The clouds occupying the entire sky had also become darker. The wind was colder too. *I have to finish this before the weather gets even worse.* Touko hurried to Taki’s house. In that meantime, Touko’s brain was haunted by Kumagai Naoto. Someone who doesn’t retain information. Someone who doesn’t stay in people’s memories. Someone who cannot be seen even by the sharpest eyes. Not many would qualify that as ‘existing.’ *Right, that can’t be called existing,* Touko

thought. *Kumagai Naoto is actually air.* However, a part of herself was rejecting that conclusion. *One's humanity isn't entirely decided by their relationship with the world, is it? Denying Kumagai Naoto's attitude towards the world is fine, but I don't have the right to deny his entire humanity.* Every time she reached a conclusion, she would come up with counter arguments for it and more arguments to counter those; her mind was completely worn out by the time she reached Taki's house.

"Excuse me~!"

She opened the door made rusty by the salty wind. No response. She tried calling again but still nothing. *Is she out picking up detritus? No, even she wouldn't head to the beach with this weather, I hope. She would be crazy if she did.* Touko guessed she was probably buying groceries. *Still, she should at least lock the door.*

Ugh...

The moment Touko was about to turn around, a groan-like sound reached her ears. She listened attentively. *I can't hear anything. Did I dream it?*

Ugh...

No, I didn't. Touko entered with her shoes still on. She ran down the hallway, opened the door, and stepped inside the living room. She spotted Taki on the floor behind the sofa. Touko shouted Taki's name in a voice closer to a scream and held her face-down body in her arms. She found a trail of blood flowing from her temple.

"Ghh..." Taki opened her eyes ever so slightly. "Oh, it's you? Why...are you—"

"What happened?! Wh-why—"

"Calm down, it's just an accident," Taki gently loosened Touko's embrace, then put her hands on the floor and stood up. "I just slipped, that's all. You should have seen that," she then forcefully pulled up the corners of her mouth. "I even hit my head, it's really not my day today."

"But, you're bleeding a lot..."

“Some spit and it’ll be like new. It’s really not as bad as it looks,” Taki wiped her wound. “Also you know, internal bleeding is more dangerous than external one, I’m glad I got away with this.”

“Who did this to you?”

“I told you, I slipped.”

“Don’t lie.”

“Why would I?”

“I mean,” Touko glared at Taki’s wound, “this just looks like a cut to me.”

“I guess it’s obvious, huh,” Taki headed to the kitchen. She twisted the faucet open and wetted a towel. “But it’s fine.”

“What do you—”

“I got what I deserve,” she muttered, pressing the towel against her wound. “Don’t tell anyone about this, okay?”

“But you’re injured.”

“It’s hardly lethal.”

“That’s not the problem!”

“Anyway, just don’t tell anyone. You got that?”

Taki sat on a chair. Her eyes, drowned in wrinkles, were incredibly unclouded.

“...Fine.”

I’ll just say that for the time being.

“More importantly, what brought you here? Didn’t you have some business with me?”

“Oh, right. I wanted to ask about Naoto-san, but there more urgent—”

“You’ve become the whole island’s talk,” Taki smiled with just her lips. “Your investigation isn’t doing well?”

“Not really,” she answered honestly. Taki seemed desperate to change the topic. Touko accepted it would be futile to pursue this, and granted Taki’s wish. “It’s like everyone is holding their tongue.”

“They’re not under silence or anything. You understand that yourself, don’t you? They don’t know anything at all about Naoto-kun.”

“But why is that? He might not have much of a presence, but that’s no reason for absolutely everyone to not care about him. This is a small island. Not a big city like Tokyo or New York.”

“You will find isolated people anywhere. Even within groups, even within families, there are always people whom no one is looking at. Please understand that.”

“That can’t be.”

It’s impossible.

“It’s one of those things you will never understand if you don’t already do. You probably can’t even imagine it. ...Well, I’m talking like I get it, but I’m in the same camp as you, basically.”

“Where do you think Naoto-san went?”

“He never existed to begin with, so he could’ve gone anywhere or nowhere,” Taki answered in a bored tone. “I’m not sure I should be saying this as the person who raised him, but even I couldn’t see Naoto-kun. His innermost piece is pure white. Or pure black, maybe.”

“I have no idea what you’re saying.”

“Yeah, no surprise. I don’t even get it myself. Eh, that’s where words hit their limit,” Taki let out air through her nose. “Sorry but could you let me rest for a bit? The wound aches when I speak.”

“Oh, of course. I’m sorry,” Touko chose to be obedient. *There’s no point asking any more than that.* “Um, but regarding this wound...”

“Don’t tell anyone,” Taki repeated. “Please.”

Used fireworks, dead shellfish, vinyl bags, etc. Misaki was standing on the beach littered with such detritus. She was staring at the gray expanse of water under the rain, not even holding an umbrella. Touko slowly walked up to her.

“Who is that?” Misaki turned back. Her face was pallid. Her shirt and pants were drenched wet. Her body was trembling due to the cold. “Ahh... Sorry, I have no idea who you are. Looks like I forgot everything. I’m really...sorry. I...had forgotten almost everything when I woke up this morning, it was a shock for sure. Are you a friend of mine? If you are, please tell me, what kind of person am I?” She then held her head. “I dunno what to do with my brain. It keeps forgetting all sorts of things. There’s no point in studying. There’s no point in living. If it’s just to forget it all anyway. The current me is empty. It’s pretty amazing. There’s really nothing in there. I don’t even know where I am or why I came to this beach, I don’t even remember where I was doing a few hours ago.” She brushed away the hair that was sticking on her cheeks. “Oh, also, I was holding this,” she said, taking out a paring knife from her pocket. There was some red blood on the blade. “I have no memories of why I’m in possession of this. Say, this is blood, right? Did I...hurt someone? I don’t even remember,” she tossed the knife onto the sand. It instantly became untraceable, hiding among detritus. “Haah, I’ve forgotten so much,” Misaki hung her head, her drenched body shaking all over. “I remember nooothing. If it were just my memories, fine, but...emotions, is that the word? I’ve even dumped these out; it almost feels refreshing in a way. I mean, liking, hating, feeling good, feeling awful—all of those disappeared. What do you think? It’s not my fault that I end up emotionless with this brain, is it? Yeah, there’s really no point in me being alive.” The rain was starting to get stronger. It was making a lot of noise in the ocean. “Want me to tell you something incredible? I don’t remember who I am. I forgot my name, my gender, what I like doing, my strong and weak suits, what I like to eat, the music I like, the authors I like, and even the people I like. Haha, impressed,

aren't you?" The rain was piercing into her. However, Misaki kept standing like a ghost, unperturbed by it. "So nothing comes up. Nothing comes out of my brain. I mean, what do you expect, it doesn't have anything. It's empty. Say, what should I do? What am I supposed to do now that I've become like this?" The beach was starting to get dark. The clouds were growing thicker and thicker. The rain was following along, growing ever fiercer. It was like needles were pouring down. "What to do? What am I to do? What should I do?" She then raised her face and looked in Touko's direction again. "...Ah!" Her unstable eyes suddenly froze. "That ring," she said, wringing out her voice. "That's...it's my ring. Hey, give it back... Give it back!"

3

Touko ran away.

She'd abandoned her umbrella at some point, so the rain was hitting Touko's body directly. *I'm cold. My head hurts. I feel nauseous.* She desperately ran through this grim world where no suns existed, mud splattering under her steps. Her sneakers were covered in mud and her body entirely drenched by the time she reached the shed. She twisted the doorknob with her trembling hands, stepped inside, and turned the ceiling lamp on in panic. Having ousted the darkness, her field of vision opened up.

That's when she realized:

Hiroyuki and Yuika were nowhere to be seen.

The sleeping bags, the pot with remains of curry, the bag of beef jerky, all of these were still in their usual spots, and yet the siblings weren't here. *Where did they...whatever, I'll just change clothes. I'm so cold.* Touko took off her hoodie, jeans, and underwear, then put on another set of clothes. She wiped her hair with a bath towel then put some water to boil. She threw the ring against the floor. Even so, her trembling didn't stop. Her lips were numb and her teeth were chattering. Touko had realized that this trembling wasn't only due to the cold. Fear. That engulfed Touko. She was currently the mightiest coward, afraid of everything. She was experiencing symptoms similar to when you think about ghosts late at night in bed even though you don't believe in them, and find your body and psyche stiffened in fear before you know it, and you can no longer open your eyes. The water was bubbling so she made instant coffee. However, drinking it didn't warm her body and the trembling showed no sign of diminishing. It was like she had become an epicenter. She was rolled up, trembling, when this world of darkness was visited by a rift of light for only a brief moment. A roar that resonated in her stomach arrived a few seconds later. It was lightning. She covered her ears by reflex. Everything seemed frightening to the current Touko. However, the world doesn't know pity. The thundering continued. The rain was only getting louder. Wind showed up too. The latter started to make the shed creak. The ceiling lamp

swayed. The lightning peered into the room through the gap between the black curtains covering the window, making the shed's interior unnaturally bright. Touko ran to the window and covered the gap with her hands. But now that she was closer to the wall, she could hear the rain that much more. *Rat-a-tat-a-tat*. That word, not unsimilar to the process of making popcorn, incessantly beat her eardrums. And then, the thunder roared. She fell over in surprise. The room shook and an awful sound echoed. The lamp swayed alongside it, disrupting the room's lighting. Touko's response to this haunted house-like situation was to scream.

Tah-tan.

Tah-tan.

The emergence of a new sound. It felt weirdly unfitting to her. *Tah-tan, tah-tan*. The sound continued. *What is that?* Touko stood up despite being chained down by fear, and listened carefully to locate the source of this sound. *Tah-tan. Tah-tan*. Unlike the thunder and the shed's creaking, this one occurred with a strange regularity. *Tah-tan, tah-tan*. The sound kept echoing. Touko finally understood:

Someone is knocking on the window.

Tah-tan.

Tah-tan.

"Noooo!"

Tah-tan.

Tah-tan.

Who could it be? The weather is terrible. What is that person doing out there? She felt her body temperature taking a dive. Her heart pounded like crazy and hurt. Touko grabbed the doorknob and secured it with her hands. This shed didn't have a lock. *Please please please don't come go back*. Despite her prayers, the sound didn't go away. *Tah-tan, tah-tan*. Then lightning roared. She grasped the knob so hard the tip of her fingers became completely white. None of the sounds tormenting Touko were showing any sign of dying down. The veins behind her ears were about to burst open. She almost threw up from

sheer fright. The sound of thunder falling. The sound of a colossal amount of droplets crashing down. The sound of the shed creaking under the pressure of the wind. *Tah-tan, tah-tan*. And finally, the sound of the world collapsing. These were more than enough to shatter Touko's feelings.

The boiling point.

That thirst for destruction was inhabiting Touko. She let go of the knob and jumped at Hiroyuki's suitcase. She dug through it under the light of the swaying lamp. However, she didn't find anything she could use as a weapon. She clicked her tongue and kicked the suitcase away. She couldn't hear the knocks against the window. Touko glared at the shed's door for a while, then barged out alongside the flash of a lightning bolt.

She was instantly hit by a horizontal sweep of the downpour. Her new clothes were already wet like a rag, but obviously Touko didn't care. She also paid no heed to her damp hair being blown out. She leaned forward so that she could see a minimum, and started going around the shed. She walked on, enduring the pain of the crazed droplets riding the wind and assailing her. She reached the first corner. She extended her head past it and took a peek. *Nobody*. She put a hand on the wall and put her heavy, muddy sneakers into motion. The next corner had a window. Touko once again took a peek with just her face. *Nobody*. *Did they leave already?* A flash of lightning. An exceedingly-bright light filled the world for just a brief moment. Soon after, a tremor-like roaring. Panicking, she unconsciously turned back. She could see the other shed's sticky walls. The building, appearing blurry amidst the downpour, stood out as eerie. The flash sprawled out onto the sky and the rest of the island. Right then...Touko spotted *that*. A black silhouette standing in front of the sticky shed.

"Ahhhh!" Touko wailed. Her thirst for destruction abruptly toppled over. "Stop it..."

The flash died down, and darkness returned to the world. Even so, she could still distinguish the silhouette after seeing it once. Now what? *What should I do?* The silhouette started moving while Touko was vacillating. It ran

out in the direction of the cliff. Touko chased it almost by reflex. Fear loses its potency once past the critical point. With her drenched, heavy clothes and her freezing, unruly body, she couldn't catch up to the silhouette. Her toes started aching. The person running ahead didn't look like they would stop anytime soon. Touko's lack of regular exercise showed; she was gradually running out of breath. When she opened her mouth, seeking oxygen, rain filled it. She spewed it out along with spit. The silhouette and Touko kept running. They were in front of the tower. Touko was nearing her physical limits due to this terrible weather combined with tremendous exercise. The air coming out of her throat was whistling awkwardly. Her belly was heavy as though she'd drunk liquid lead. Her vision was narrow. She suddenly lost the strength to keep her legs going. Her consciousness wavered. She fell onto the ground. She plunged headfirst into sludge. Some bitter mud got caught up in her throat. That brought her consciousness back. Her eyes had let dirty water in and hurt. Touko wiped the mud off her face and stood up. The mud's damage had spread all over her body; she looked like a failed golem. Her clothes felt awful to move in with the grains of sand that had infiltrated them. Clots of mud that got stuck onto her hair came apart with the rain and trailed down her face. Touko combed her hair back. The silhouette was gone. She could only see the tower. In such terrible weather, it seemed impossible to find it again. *I hate it, but I guess I should give up. Even if I catch up to it, what could a frail girl who loses consciousness after running a bit even do...* Touko directed her face to the sky to let the rain wash the mud off her face.

Right then, lightning flashed.

The tower's highest floor got illuminated, and she spotted Misaki standing behind the window.

Misaki was looking down at the ground with a smile.

A disgusting sensation coursed through Touko from the tip of her head down to her toes, as if shattered glass was digging into her skin. She was running towards the tower before she had the chance to consider the state of her legs. She dashed up the stairs, burning all of the energy she had left in her.

And she wished. *Please, let me make it in time.* She prayed. *I beg you.* She tripped somewhere on the stairs leading to the fourth floor, losing the sneaker on her left foot. She hit her elbow quite hard. Even so, she immediately stood up and hurried to the highest floor. She couldn't move her elbow after the shock. Her lungs were still on the verge of rupture. But Touko didn't stop running. With a hand pushing against the concrete wall, her desperate breathing gasping for air again and again, and a mixture of mud and saliva driveling out of her mouth, she kept running.

And at last, she reached the final floor...the fifth floor.

The rain that stepped in through the glassless windows was mercilessly hitting the floor. A few puddles had formed, on which countless ripples went through the cycle of life. Black clouds reflected on the blurred water.

However, not Misaki.

None of the puddles were reflecting the amnesiac girl. Touko raised her face. The result didn't change. Misaki wasn't here. *Did we miss each other? That can't be. There's no way down other than the stairs. Except...for one.* Touko looked down from the window frame with much anguish. Misaki's body, with bones broken all over...wasn't there. Such an object didn't exist on the muddy ground. Touko checked beneath the window on the opposite side. She also peeked under the windows on the side. She returned to the initial one, and took another look down.

Misaki's corpse was nowhere to be seen.

True confusion never fades away unless it gets dispelled. It remains inside people until death. And sometimes it resurfaces in the mind with no forewarning to wreak havoc. Touko had returned to the island because she didn't want to be like that. Her objective was to defuse her confusion. And yet...it had only grown stronger.

The rain and wind didn't falter. Lightning kept roaring too. However, Touko had lost all fear towards these. She had devolved into a creature whose sole function was to walk in the rain. Her long exposure under the downpour had robbed her body of its warmth. Her lips were pale blue. The remaining mud on her hair, skin, and clothes were clinging too hard to them for the rain to wash them off. Her sneaker-less left foot was experiencing spasms again and again due to the pain and the cold. The rain, tears, snot, and mud had turned her face into a tragedy. However, Touko was no longer capable of acknowledging her own state. The spell of invisibility had not only hit the world, but herself as well. And currently, she was continually running away instead of thinking of a strategy. *If I can't see or understand, I might as well stop trying to see and abandon all effort to understand. I did all I could and it still didn't work out so it's not my fault.* She was trying to believe in that. However, not being an idiot who values the process over the result, she had noticed her escapism. She was running away from Kumagai Naoto, from Misaki, from all sorts of things.

"What of it?" Touko said to someone. "I'm going back to Kitahiroshima, leave me alone."

Lightning flashed, followed by a roar a few seconds later. She had unknowingly arrived in front of Kumagai's house. *He was an asshole, but I might as well tell him goodbye.* As she was standing behind the front door, these thoughts in mind, she heard an unfamiliar—and yet strangely familiar—voice from the inside. Touko realized. She couldn't believe it; that was Kumagai's laughter.

...He's laughing?

Kumagai, the embodiment of rudeness, scowls, and unfriendliness, was laughing. *Laughing?* That contributed further to Touko's confusion. Her brain that was frozen to the core produced a bizarre sound. Touko opened the door. Even though it was probably meaningless in this situation, she took off her shoe before coming in. Kumagai's laughter echoed again. A carefree, childlike laughter. She genuinely couldn't believe that Kumagai could produce such cute laughter. She entered the living room. However, Kumagai wasn't here. *Then...* Touko looked at the door leading to his bedroom. She grabbed the knob with her drenched hands and slowly opened the door.

The sight of Kumagai and Taki, hugging each other naked on the bed, flooded Touko's eyes.

For a few seconds, the world was frozen. Neither Touko, Kumagai, nor Taki were trying to say or do anything. They were just thinking, trying to process the situation. Touko looked at the sight in front of her in silence. Taki, a huge bandage adorning her forehead, hid her exposed upper body with the blanket. It revealed her old, saggy legs. *No matter how well you take care of yourself, you can't win against age*—Touko experienced this carefree realization amidst the chaos. Kumagai, lying next to Taki, was looking at her with a dumb look on his face.

"What..." Touko decided to speak. "What are you doing?"

"That's my question, wh-why are you—" Unsurprisingly, Kumagai was stammering. "I-isn't that illegal trespassing..."

This wasn't his usual, malicious demeanor. He seemed even more shaken than Touko by this sudden turn of events.

"Ah! What are you doing here?" An unclear anger suddenly emerged within her. "How dare you at a time like—"

"It's none of your business what we do and when," Kumagai sat up. His naked upper body came exposed. "More importantly, what's the deal with you? You come in all dirty without authorization and now you wanna lecture us? Fuck off."

“What *are* you two?” Touko was aware that her tone was growing harsher. “Didn’t Taki-san raise you like her own son? And look at what you’re doing now!”

“Shut up. Yeah she raised me...and Naoto, just like we were her sons,” Kumagai glanced at Taki, who was looking down, avoiding to meet Touko’s eyes at all cost. “But we’re ultimately unrelated, we can do this if we want.”

“But, do you realize how far apart your ages are?”

“We’re 43 years apart. What of it?” he answered on the spot.

“Don’t try to take the upper ground. You really think that’ll make me recognize the legitimacy of your acts?”

“Brats like you shouldn’t use complicated words,” Kumagai put on his glasses and glared at Touko. “We’re in love, of course we would have sex,” he then put an arm around Taki’s shoulders. “Or what, do you not have sex or something? Hey, tell us, do you not have sex? You don’t feel the desire to have sex with the person you love? Heh, that’s even more creepy, you frigid.”

“No matter how much I may love someone...” *That’s sexual harassment. I’ll sue his ass.* “I wouldn’t get the desire to do that with the person that raised me!”

“Well, my condolences. That doesn’t bother me. Well, of course, partly because we’re unrelated, but still.”

“Wow, good for you. You can do whatever you want, huh. Wooow, congrats.” *Drop dead.* “But who cares, I don’t give a damn about this,” muddy water entered her eyes. She felt like crying. “What makes me mad is that you dare to be all carefree in *this* situation!”

“What situation?”

“Is that an attempt to play dumb now? Do you even understand why I look like such a mess?” Touko pulled on her muddied, drenched clothes. “Also,” she shouted, pointing at Taki, “I won’t let you get away pretending you didn’t ask about that bandage!”

“...M-Misaki,” Taki finally opened her mouth. She had the voice of a creaky old lady. “D-did Misaki do something...?”

“Your daughter flew out of the house holding a knife she used to cut you, what the hell are you doing here!?”

“That’s not... No, you got it wrong,” Taki raised her face. She didn’t try moving the rest of her body out of fear of being exposed. “I’ve been thinking about it ever since, but I was scared, so I came to Masato-kun to discuss and—”

“What a discussion you were having!”

“We’re already done with that,” Kumagai butted in to support Taki.

“Done?” Touko put on a sarcastic face. “Were you. So what did you do?”

“Hey, how about you screw off now?”

“Don’t be unreasonable. I’m a victim of your shenanigans. You’ve dragged me into this since the day you ordered me to monitor Naoto-san.”

“I don’t care,” he delivered, coldly. “That’s *your* personal problem, isn’t it? Deal with it yourself.”

“That was my intention, until now. But I can’t. When I ask this island’s people about Naoto-san, every single one of them claim they don’t know anything, and I never have any idea what’s going on inside your head, and Misaki-chan apparently has a disease that makes her forget stuff, and I still have no idea how the disappearance from that shed works, and same for the tower, and when I come to pay you a visit now *this* is what I see?!” Touko listed all of the elements that contributed to her confusion. “Misaki-chan said she liked you, but I have no idea what the hell she saw in you.”

“What...” Taki slightly reacted.

“That’s just her current memory, isn’t it?” Kumagai’s attitude didn’t change. “It’ll be gone by tomorrow anyway.”

“Asshole!”

“I know.”

“How can you two even be in a relationship?” Touko sent a fierce glare to the couple on the bed. “I mean, aren’t you further apart than a normal child and mother? If anything, you could be her grandson. So what the hell are you doing? Disgusting.”

“Disgusting?”

Kumagai, who had been unresponsive, suddenly changed his expression.
I see, so that's what rubs you the wrong way.

“Yeah you're disgusting. Doing it with someone that much older than you is obviously disgusting, but even just having the idea of doing it is gross...even more so when that elderly woman is your mother figure who's been raising you since you were a child. There's no word for people like that other than disgusting. Huh, you disagree? I'm getting goosebumps, you weirdo. I'm almost gagging from looking at —”

An alarm clock flew her way. Touko dodged it by reflex. It crashed into the wall before falling onto the floor, opposing no resistance. It then made a sound. *Brrrring. Brrrring. Brrrring.*

“Shut up!” Kumagai shouted. He quickly stood up. His upper body was naked, but he was wearing pants. It seemed they had yet to start the actual act. “Fucking kid, running your mouth over and over and over...”

“What, did I say anything incorrect?” Touko intended not to falter, but her instincts, sensing fear and danger, made her take a step back.

“How is that disgusting?!” Kumagai trotted over to her. “Why do you find it disgusting!? Why is everyone...!” *Brrrring. Brrrring. Brrrring.*

A deranged voice.

Touko knew intuitively.

He would kill her at this rate.

Kumagai was already standing before Touko's eyes.

Stop it, Masato-kun! Taki pleaded desperately from the bed, but needless to say, that was in vain.

“I'll wait for your apology after you die,” Kumagai muttered in a low voice before throwing a punch at Touko's face. Receiving a shock that shook her brain, she collapsed onto the floor. A clump of hair hardened by mud entered her mouth. Another shock to her stomach. Kumagai kicked her solar plexus again and again. She escaped cries of fear and pain, but these were meaningless. The beating didn't stop. Her consciousness was faltering, but she

and the sound of the drawer hitting her head and Taki's screaming and the clock's incessant *brrrrrrring* completely shattered Touko. They destroyed any and all parts of her. They destroyed her very existence.

Bring.

The alarm stopped.

Touko lost consciousness.

And the story progressed.

Chapter 8

The Runaway

Cold.

That was the first sensation Touko experienced upon waking up.

She felt extremely cold. *Did I catch a cold?* She rubbed her eyelids. Dried-up mud came off in pieces and fell down. She sat up, suffering like her body had been glued to the floor and she was peeling it off. It seemed that dried blood and mud were acting as adhesive. When she twisted her neck to look at the floor, she saw a human silhouette drawn on it. She could hear her bones echoing across her entire body every time she used an articulation. She produced a yawn, as if to replace the air inside her lungs. Her body wasn't functional yet. She moved her eyes sideways and found a drawer with a hole in it. Neither Kumagai nor Taki were in the bed. The sky peering through the window was still gray. Touko combed her hair with her fingers. A lot of mud fell off. She shook her head to the side, which produced a rasping noise. Her body ached all over. Her left, bare sock was hard like a plaster cast. *I want to take a hot bath.* Touko bent her knees and tried to stand up. She was assailed by a sensation of vertigo. Even so, she managed to stay on her feet. It looked like she was more hurt than she thought. The harsh coldness in her body wasn't going away. She somehow made it to the living room, supporting herself with a hand against the wall. Kumagai wasn't here either. *Whatever. It works out in my favor.* Touko headed to the bathroom. She stoked the boiler, then accumulated water inside the tub. She abandoned all of her clothes while it was filling up. At every garment she removed, a stench of mud, sweat, and rain irked her nose. When the tub was ready, she soaked into the hot water down to her head. Mud washed off and turned the water dark almost instantly. While she discarded that water and waited for the tub to fill up again, she scrubbed her body with a bubbly towel on which she'd applied a bunch of body soap. The bubbles turned brown on contact. Her hair didn't produce bubbles no matter how many times she washed it. Once she confirmed the tub was full, she washed off the soap with a shower head. Her skin finally retrieved its original

color. She then soaked into the bathtub a second time. Her body warmed up. Now that she had a minimal amount of comfort, she also used hair conditioner and washed her face. When she was done bathing, she searched for new clothes in Kumagai's bedroom. However, there wasn't anything good. She put on a long coat on top of a white running jacket. She wasn't wearing anything down there. She felt slightly like a pervert. Touko left the house in that getup.

The air outside was chilling. The wind blowing under the gray sky killed any warmth it touched. Her warmed-up body cooled back down in a matter of minutes. Her lips were trembling by the time she reached the shed. She produced underwear and clothes out of her duffle bag and put them on. A cutsew shirt with jeans. She was still cold with that, so she put the coat back on. *Oh yeah...* Touko looked around the shed. Hiroyuki and Yuika weren't here. *Jesus, where did these weirdo siblings go off to? I almost got killed here...* A dark anger emerged inside her. Touko took aim at Hiroyuki's suitcase and threw her own bag at it. A clean hit. A black object flew out of the suitcase. *What's that?* Touko approached and grabbed it. It was a tape recorder. It contained a rewinded tape. She pressed the replay button. *Da-da-da-dahh!* It started playing a distorted version of 'Wedding March.' Soon followed by Hiroyuki's voice, saying, "Hi there Touko-chan, I hope you are doing well." *Wow, wow, wow, wow, what the hell?* Touko couldn't close her mouth. Hiroyuki's cheerful voice continued playing, 'Wedding March' in the background. "Nee-san and I will probably have left the island by the time you are listening to this tape. ...Oh, calm down, it's okay, no need to panic. The world is full of kind people. You shouldn't have any issue going back to Hokkaido. Oh right, just so we're clear, we're not doing this to bully you, okay? Like I've said many times, your summer break won't end unless you solve your issues yourself. Also, field trips aren't over till you get home. The teacher escorts you on the way there, but they don't drive you all the way back home, do they? And I'm just not that overprotective. Also, I'm actually super busy. I can't laze around here forever. Er...uhh you know what they say, people can do anything if they

put their mind to it, so good—” Touko slammed the recorder against the wall with all her might. The tape flew out of it, as if sticking out its tongue. What a twist of fate; she had been left behind. Abandoned. Her body started shaking. Touko burst out of the shed.

She ran through the outside world where a cold, salty breeze blew. She headed for the natural port, knowing full-well it was futile. Even though this sudden exercise when she hadn't fully recovered made her nauseous, she didn't slow down. The cliff, intermittently whipped by waves, wasn't housing a cargo ship. She peered into the horizon but couldn't make out a single vessel. *Why does this shit have to happen to me? And what am I supposed to do now?* She was at a complete loss. However, there was nobody around to offer her a helping hand. Staying in a perpetual daze here wouldn't lead to any progress. Therefore, Touko walked along the shore. Well, that was obviously an attempt at escapism and not a fruitful strategy, but it was still better than doing nothing. She was right next to the ocean, so the wind was at its saltiest. She hunched her back, plunged her hands deep into the coat's pockets, and kept on walking. This walk wouldn't produce any meaning. She would merely lap around the island and return to her starting point. It was pointless. She was out of breath. Her legs sometimes gave way.

Touko kept on walking, taking no breaks, and eventually reached the beach.

Instead of detritus, the beach was littered with tons of toys.

A music box with a tiny angel holding a trumpet drawn on it, a teddy bear wearing green clothes, a snowman figure with a top hat on its head, star-shaped candles still in their box, a glass jar full to the brim with jelly beans, a reindeer made of tin, a Barbie doll wearing Santa Claus clothes... Such toys were piled on and on and on atop the mountain of detritus. An unfathomable amount of toys was covering the entirety of the beach. That which had once been painted gray with detritus was now occupied by a colorful composition of gold and silver, of red and green. Touko stared at the heap of toys in total

silence. Her brain had short-circuited. The most complex task it could currently perform was recognizing things to exist. Waves came, sweeping away some toys and spreading new ones onto the sand. There was a pack of ornaments near her. Shaped like stars, like bells, like Santa hats. Underneath that was a cute picture book with a fir tree drawn on the cover. A colorful light garland was floating on the ocean. A piece of cardboard adorning a smiling Santa Claus drifted to Touko's feet.

On it, the following was written:

Merry Christmas!!!!

The green-and-red Christmas card got blown away by the wind.

She checked the date on the watch attached to her wrist. December 21st, Wednesday. *Looks like I slept for about two months. No wonder it's so cold. We're in winter already.* Touko headed for Kumagai's house. Time had finished flowing all the way. Therefore, it was way too late on all fronts. Well, she knew that painfully well herself. The world's last moments had passed while Touko was asleep and washed away in the abyss of history—she was sufficiently aware of this.

The story had already concluded.

All the grand revelations and suspenseful action scenes resolved while Touko was deep into slumber. This part is situated beyond the final pages. What remains after burning through all the interesting facets, the behind-the-scenes readers never get to see. She arrived at Kumagai's house. She opened the door and stepped inside. She knew he wasn't here anymore. She couldn't fathom his current whereabouts, but at the very least he wasn't on the island. She glanced around the living room before leaving the house. There was no need to check his bedroom. Touko then headed to Taki's house. Although she was walking in a post-denouement world, Touko was still content. Her treatment in the story was indeed humiliating as a main character, but compared to the pure bliss that came from walking behind the scenes, being a main character wasn't worth crap to her. She arrived at Taki's house. Misaki's bedroom was on the second floor. Pink carpet, yellow curtains, plushies beside the bed...at first glance, it seemed like a normal girl's bedroom. However, Touko knew that wasn't the case. She knew the tragic circumstances behind that impossibility. She opened the desk's drawer. It contained a few notebooks thrown in haphazardly. Touko picked one out. The cover had 'Memory Notes 36' written in the center with a magic marker. She hesitated a little, but ultimately opened it. Inside it were fragments of memories detailed in varying font sizes. Promises with friends, what she had for dinner last night, conversations with Taki, a detailed map of the room with

Touko looked through the most recent notebook. *Memory Notes 57* was on the desk's shelf.

“Important (09/09/2005):

- A girl called Kobayashi Touko came to the island. I don't know the details yet. Apparently she was on the cargo ship. I want to meet her. I want to talk to her. I'm curious about her. These are my current thoughts.”

“Important (09/12/2005):

- I met Touko-chan under the tower. We talked. Earned info: Touko is the same age as me. Talking with her is fun. That's the first time I spoke with someone from outside the island. I don't want to forget. I want to know more about Touko-chan. I want to talk with her more.”

“Important (10/01/2005):

- I've completely forgotten about Kobayashi Touko. The current me doesn't have the memories of having met and talked with Kobayashi Touko-san. I can't even remember her face. We probably won't meet again so it's not a big deal, but seeing memories disappear is always sad.”

She averted her eyes from the book. She couldn't bear reading through Misaki's suffering any longer. *I need to change methods.* Touko pulled out all of the drawer's notebooks onto the desk and sat at the chair. She then picked one at random from it and scanned for the words she was looking for, as though searching for a marble dropped in a sandbox. She kept up that process for hours. However, she had a hard time finding it. She just got to see a bunch of things she wished she hadn't (panicked handwriting from when she didn't have much time to write, lines filled with 'remember' repeated over and over like an incantation, traces of dried-up tears), which made her feel more and more depressed. Her vision was starting to get blurry, but she maintained her search nevertheless. The only way she had to intervene in the story was to come across words the characters had left behind. After wearing down her

nerves and driving her retinas to spasms, she finally found the keyword she was searching for.

‘Love’

Touko had been looking for sentences including that word.

“Important feelings (11/02/2004):

- I love Kumagai Naoto-san. I’ve loved him for a long time. I love his face, his personality, what he thinks about, everything. Nobody on this island ever gives him the time of the day, but I’m properly looking at Naoto-san. And I’m confident I understand just how wonderful a person he is. He doesn’t belong on this island. He ought to leave this place and go somewhere with more people. After all, his vocation isn’t to be a wholesale employee, a fieldworker, or a fisher, but to be a poet. I’ve had the chance to read his stories a few times, and all of them were amazing. But it’s plain as day that the people here don’t value them. Everyone wishes for young, healthy, and robust workers. Not poets. Nakajima Atsushi has a short story called *Hound-Haunted*. Naoto-san is just like the character Shak from that, a poet who doesn’t do any labor. And the Neuri tribe, which doesn’t see any value in non-workers, is basically this island. I hate this so much. Naoto-san won’t be recognized for his just worth here. I love Naoto-san. I want to do something for him. I have to act before I forget about him.”

A note had been taped on the notebook next to where this was written, and it was crammed with tiny letters:

“I’ve forgotten my feelings for him. The current me likes Masato-san instead. I find it scary how easily my feelings can be switched around. Very stupid, too. Should I prioritize the original me’s feelings or my current ones?”

Touko read that, then closed the book. She wondered for a while about what to do with the heap of notebooks filling the desk, then realized she had no rights to decide that and got away from there, leaving the desk in that state. Right when she was about to leave the room, she finally noticed the

sheet of paper plastered onto the door. She had yet again wasted a lot of time. The story really seemed to despise Touko.

She pressed the interphone. After a little wait, the front door got unlocked and opened.

“Ohh,” Tsukamoto looked at Touko and made a weird sound. “If that’s not Reiko.”

“Ah...hello.”

I guess I should greet him at least.

“Yeah hi, just come in, no need for manners.”

“Where did you put your red bike? I didn’t see it in front of the house...”

“It got a little out of shape, you see. It’s at the repair shop right now. I should get it back by next week.”

Touko was guided to the living room and invited to enter the kotatsu. *Thank you, but I’m not in the right mental state for it.* She could tell her heart was beating at a fast pace.

“Hey Reiko, did you see that thing at the beach?”

“Ah, I did. That sure was a lot of toys...”

“Actually, a tanker packed with Christmas toys dropped a container,” Tsukamoto raised the corners of his lips. “Heh, it went out with a bang at least.”

“A container, huh...”

What a cute disaster.

“You already had lunch?”

“Not yet, no.”

“Woah, that’s no good. Alright, I’ll make you something, just wait a bit,” Tsukamoto said, heading for the kitchen. He opened a shelf and started choosing the pot he would use. Touko sneaked out of the living room. She climbed the stairs next to the entrance. There was a long, dark, and narrow hallway on the second floor.

There was a wooden door all the way in the back.

Touko swallowed her saliva. She then silently drew closer and stopped in front of the door. Her heart was still beating like crazy. Maybe as a result, her chest felt awfully cramped. As if her ribs were creaking. Even breathing was painful. *What are you doing, you dimwit?* Touko scolded herself. *The thing you've been looking for this whole time is right behind this plate of wood, you know? It's the moment of your life. If you understand, get yourself together, god-damnit.* Touko audibly cleared her throat. She then wiped the sweat forming on her forehead many times. And finally, she said,

“...You're here, aren't you? Kumagai Naoto-san.”

After a lingering silence, a reply came back from beyond the door.

“Hahah, you found me out?” It was her first time hearing Kumagai Naoto's voice. It was weirdly hoarse in the middle range and overall hard to make out. “How did you figure out the place?”

“Misaki-chan's bedroom had a memo indicating this spot. That's a pretty shrewd idea, hiding inside Tsukamoto-san's house.”

“You think so?”

“Please open the door,” Touko grabbed the knob and twisted it. As expected, it was locked. It didn't budge. “I want to meet face to face and have a proper conversation.”

“Haven't we seen each other plenty already?” Kumagai Naoto replied from beyond the door. “I'm not opening it under any circumstances.”

“Fine, then I'll take it down.”

“I wouldn't recommend it,” Kumagai Naoto replied, composed. “If you show the tiniest sign of doing that, I will open the window and jump off. A fall from the second floor shouldn't be lethal, but what if I were to fall head first?”

“I can't imagine you'd have the courage for that.”

“You are entitled to your opinion. I shall at least warn you that if you felt the slightest discomfort at the idea, you should refrain. So, how long are you going to hold onto that knob for? Also, can you back off a little?”

Touko let go of the knob and retreated about 50 centimeters. *Good girl*, Kumagai Naoto commented.

“...I’ve finally found you,” words unconsciously flew out of Touko’s mouth. “I’ve been searching for so, so long.”

“But it seems you were a tad late in finding me. The story is already over. Nii-san, Taki-san, and Misaki aren’t here anymore. The only ones remaining are you and me...well, basically unsold goods.”

“That’s all I need.”

“Heh, you know how to please people.”

“Did you notice I was monitoring you?” Impatient, Touko was already asking questions.

“I mean, no need for that. I heard it directly from nii-san. ‘I have a woman who can keep looking at you in Misaki’s stead,’ he said. And guess what, there really was a cute girl monitoring me in the shed across the next day. That was a real shock. Well, I kept up my usual routine anyway.”

“A woman to keep looking at you...” *Despite what he said about cutting him off, he still looked after him, huh.*

“Still, nii-san is such an idiot,” Kumagai Naoto laughed, empathically. “He actually believed I needed to be observed and appraised by people. He doesn’t get it at all. We’ve been together since we were born, and yet he doesn’t understand anything. Why in the world should I be influenced by an exterior gaze?”

“You’re not?”

“Nope.”

“So you didn’t pay any heed to me the entire time?”

“Of course. It would be a different story if you were like Misaki and tried to look inside me, but I certainly don’t care about someone only preoccupied by observing the outer layer from start to finish. You’re just like the people on this island. You felt like you knew all about me from having brushed my surface, and assumed I was hollow, didn’t you? You pegged me for someone

who doesn't have anything, didn't you? And you came to look at me like a mere piece of the decor, didn't you?"

"I...did, indeed."

He was right on the money.

"My worth is decided by the stories I write. So how I look when thinking about or writing them doesn't matter in the slightest. But you failed to understand that. Nii-san and Taki-san and everyone on this island also failed to understand that. They took the surface for the whole thing. They kept peering at the surface, which is but a shadow, and called me a lost cause, further increasing my transparency. Am I wrong?"

"Nah, that's right..."

"You were merely looking at the membrane enveloping me."

"Come on," violence manifested in her, "you can drop it already, I get it now!" Touko hardened a fist and punched the door.

"No violence," he warned in a sharp tone. "Got it?"

"I am thoroughly aware of my blunder. I now understand exactly how the way I used to look at you was mistaken."

"...Blunder, huh," Kumagai Naoto muttered. "Shouldn't your biggest blunder be how you turned me into an invisible man? Hah, still, that really caught me off-guard. I see you coming into my shed with a dreadful face, and the first thing you say is 'He's not here!' Just imagine... Hah hah, that was a masterpiece. Truly. You know, humans are pretty damn potent. Your brain cells and their self-hypnosis ability must be pretty off-the-charts to be able to make people invisible. I knew that self-hypnosis erases the need to obtain an answer from the outside world, but I didn't think it was to this extent."

Touko instantly understood. Kumagai Naoto hadn't vanished at all from inside the stick shed. He was simply typing away on his laptop, like usual. She came to not see him anymore because she had kept raising his degree of transparency in her mind. Back then, Kumagai Naoto was a mere bundle of matter to Touko. She valued him no more and no less than a single ballpoint pen laying on a desk, a slice of vegetable in a fridge, a shirt shoved into a

dresser, or a manga copy on a shelf. People don't see everything that exists in their field of vision. They separate things of interest from the rest, and only recognize the former, selected group. That day, Touko's brain seemed to have decided to categorize Kumagai Naoto as 'something that doesn't need to be recognized.' As a result, Kumagai Naoto wouldn't appear in the world she perceived.

And there you go, the completion of a pathetic invisible man.

"Huh?" She felt like laughing. "So freaking stupid."

"Honestly, that was a bit of a shock," Kumagai Naoto ignored Touko's comment. "I've lived somewhere I wouldn't be observed by anyone, yeah, but never before I've encountered someone who couldn't even see me."

"It seems like I did something awful to you."

"Not really. Thanks to that case, a new path opened before me."

"And yet you ended up here..." Touko coldly glared at the door.

"Nah. *This* is my new path," the door replied. "Do you understand?"

"Not in the slightest."

"Having become invisible, I openly walked by you and your dumbfounded expression, then walked out of the door, just as openly as before. Man, I felt so great and terrible at the same time in the moment. I got overwhelmed by a sensation of release for the first time ever. Well, that went away after a few hours anyway. I mean, obviously. There's no correlation between turning invisible and being freed."

"Did you move into this room right after that?"

"No, I came back to the shed and unplugged the laptop's adapter and battery. That's when I remembered about Tsukamoto-san. Your cognition is pretty amazing, but it's still nothing compared to Tsukamoto-san's. I've seen him talk to a kettle on a stove before."

"And you've been in this room ever since? In this locked room?"

"I left once. Other than that, baths and toilet breaks aside, I haven't left."

"And you don't realize you're insane?"

“Unlike you greedy bunch, I only demand one thing from the world. Can you guess what that is?”

“Beats me.”

“My very own domain. And this is the ideal place for it. I can keep writing all day without being influenced by anything. Here I can exist outside of the mind of the people who don’t understand me.”

“Moving from a tunnel to a cave looks like a bad move to me, though.”

“I’m terribly bored with the world... No, not quite, I’m desperate...not that either. Right, I’m disappointed. I’m disappointed by this selfish world that keeps asking for novel, revolutionary things, and yet always settles on commonplace, already-existing things instead.”

“What an awful speech.”

“Oh please. I’m purposefully phrasing it in a way so even morons can get it.”

“Do you want everybody to look at you or not, in the end?”

“I’m not entirely sure, actually.”

“Then don’t be so haughty when you don’t even understand your own position.”

“Huh, I see. Looks like the little prodigies aren’t a fan of this type of thinking, eh.”

“I don’t especially think of myself as—”

“We’re in *my* world here!” the door howled. “You can’t make any complaints about it. To begin with, what even is there to complain about? Isn’t this heaven compared to that stupid world that only values the surface layer? Tsukamoto-san brings me my meals, and I have more than enough ink and paper lying around.”

“Why don’t you use a computer? Are you taking yourself for an author from the Meiji era?”

“Because I no longer need to use a font. Here, I can finally use my very own words, in the truest sense.” His voice sounded genuinely blissful. “Up to this

point I couldn't because of Misaki. Don't you think showing someone your writing is way more embarrassing than showing your naked body?"

"Not at all." *What is he even saying?* "Misaki-chan called you a poet."

"Heh, what an honor."

"So? Are you really writing such wonderful stories?"

"Yeah, I am," the reply came instantly. "But none of them can be understood by the masses, it seems."

"That's just an excuse sore losers use."

"You're pretty harsh, eh."

"If you're so confident in your works, how about submitting them to an award? Then you can even leave this island, rent an apartment, and...oh, and don't even try to bring up how you don't care about people's opinions. That would be just about the lamest excuse."

"Heh, I kinda like you, Miss First-Rate Critic," a low chuckle, akin to a groan, echoed from behind the door. "But that's out of the question."

"Why?"

"Because I have no plans on working as a professional author. As I've told you earlier, I have no interest in pleasing the masses. Even if you calculate with the lowest reasonable amount of optimism, you would find at most six thousand people who can sympathize with my stories."

"That sounds like enough."

"Enough? Don't be stupid. Are you telling me to pick away at my time, life, and psyche just for a puny six thousand people?!" Kumagai Naoto suddenly burst into a shout. "No thanks, I'm not writing for six thousand readers. That just can't rival the alluring proposition of writing stories for my own sake in this locked room."

"But, isn't that position mistaken for a storyteller? You get people to read the stories you create, and in return you listen to their criticism or impressions. Isn't that how an author should—"

"And what if these are all completely-off-the-mark reproaches and insults?"

“What...”

“Do you know the fear of being rejected?” Kumagai Naoto asked. “Rejection is of a different breed than indifference or ignoring. It frightens me. I’m sure I wouldn’t be able to bear it.”

“Yeah, that’s called running away!” Touko felt like kicking down the door in front of her. “Not leaving your room because you don’t want to be criticized and hurt? Come on, don’t talk like a misfit of society... Also, after looking down on the world, berating it, and attacking it so much, aren’t you still acting like you want to have something to do with it? Aren’t you contradicting yourself?”

“I know perfectly well the effect and range of my stories,” Kumagai Naoto ignored Touko’s attack. “So far, I’ve written three novels, 17 short stories, and 42 poems. However, none of them were appealing enough, had that bite that makes people pick them up, had that sense of service that makes people read them all the way through, had that mainstream appeal that makes even little girls enjoy them—if you may excuse the language—had that universality that lets everyone understand them. To repeat myself, the world is ultimately conservative.”

“If you understand that, just change your ways. You need to meet the readers halfway.”

“I would already have if I could. If I could, yeah.”

“Is that an issue with your skill? Or is your pride not letting you do it?”

“Both.”

“My, my, you have it all, don’t you?”

“Anyway, I have no intention to get published or leave this room.”

“It was Misaki-chan’s dream to see you get published.”

“Don’t use the past tense,” she felt like Kumagai Naoto’s tone dropped one notch. “Hey, I wanna ask, were you the one chasing after Misaki?”

“Eh?”

“That day, when it was raining a torrent. I thought I saw someone running after Misaki towards the tower...”

“Then—” Touko understood with that explanation. “You were by the tower on that day?”

“Seems like we both have serious cases of myopia,” Kumagai Naoto sneered. “Do you know about Misaki’s memory disorder?”

“Ah, yeah.”

“That day, she came to visit me in front of that door. Just like you’re doing now. She declared her feelings for me had vanished from her memories and that she now liked my brother, then promptly left.”

“That’s not the entire story, though, is it?”

“Hah, color me surprised,” he said, despite not sounding any more surprised than normal. “Are you one of those pretty girl detectives or something? Is that it?”

“I was simply bluffing.”

“I just got fooled then, I see.”

“So what about it?” Touko probed. “What else did Misaki-chan say?”

“That she would kill Taki-san and obtain nii-san for herself. I’m guessing she realized her memory had such a low time limit she had to resort to forceful means?”

“It doesn’t sound like anything special coming from your mouth. Wasn’t she the only person who bothered to look inside you?”

“Hoh, so you think I’m unfazed while saying that? That’s further proof you’re only looking at the surface. Not like I care,” he said with disdain. “I couldn’t just leave her alone after she said that. I got myself all wet under the rain and headed to Taki-san’s house to stop Misaki.”

“But...Taki-san was injured,” Touko remarked, reproachfully.

“Only injured. Who do you think is to be thanked for that?”

“What happened to Misaki-chan after that?”

“She ran away. Could you not ask so much from me? I’m weak, I can’t pin Misaki down while protecting Taki-san.”

“There’s not a single atom in me that wants to praise you.”

“What a harsh girl,” Kumagai Naoto let out a bitter chuckle. “I then ran after the escapee. But not only was I too late, you couldn’t see things a meter away in that downpour, could you? I looked around but with no success.”

Touko conjectured that Misaki had forgotten everything during her escape. She tried imagining how she must have felt at the time, but realizing it would only lead to unimaginable pain and suffering, she refrained.

“Then, when I was at a loss in front of the tower, I encountered Misaki as you were chasing her. She looked really surprised when she spotted me. She must not have expected I would go after her.”

“Wait... Hold on a second, please,” Touko noticed a strange detail. “Misaki-chan looked *surprised* when she saw you?”

“Yeah. Why’s that disconcerting, Miss Detective? It shouldn’t be too hard to recognize my face by looking at pictures and such, right? She might be forgetful, but come on.”

No. That’s besides the point. Misaki lost all of her memories while running. She obviously forgot Kumagai Naoto’s face too. And she definitely didn’t have the time to pick up a photograph of Kumagai Naoto while fleeing after attempting to murder her mother.

...She must have remembered.

That’s the only explanation. Misaki drew Kumagai Naoto’s existence from her memory’s drawers. Despite not even remembering me. She remembered the ring, she remembered Kumagai Naoto, but when it came to me...

“Misaki got really mad all of a sudden,” Kumagai Naoto went on, ignorant. “She rammed my head against the tower’s wall.”

“Huh?”

“I mean it literally. And she didn’t hold back at all. I passed out, though just for a few minutes. While I was out, Misaki climbed the tower, then fell from it.”

“...”

“A huge sound resounded in front of me. That’s what woke me up. A sprawl of red lay in front of me. Misaki—”

“Please stop there.”

“Misaki was flattened before me,” Kumagai Naoto didn’t stop in his words. “Have you ever seen a frog run over by a car? She was basically like that. Luckily, her innards stayed inside her stomach, but her head was completely crushed, even her brain was —”

“Stop!”

“I gathered Misaki’s shattered corpse on the spot. I have it right here. Wanna take home a bit?”

“No thanks!”

“Oh come on, don’t be so cold. Weren’t you friends?” he said with a malicious laughter. “Misaki probably planned on falling right on top of me. You know, for a double suicide.”

“...But Misaki-chan forgot her feelings for you, didn’t she? Then why?”

Did she retrieve her original feelings?

“That’s why. That’s precisely why she wanted us to die together.”

“I don’t follow you.”

“Then no need to understand... Oh, right, you don’t need to tag along with me. You can go back the way you came whenever.”

“True. I’ll take my leave, then,” Touko agreed with him. She was currently exhausted beyond words, both in body and mind. She genuinely wanted to get away from here as soon as possible. “I hope you’ll stay healthy for many years to come,” she delivered with splendid sarcasm before turning on her heels.

“Hold up,” Kumagai Naoto stopped her. “It’s a bit early, but I have a Christmas present for you. Check behind the TV in the living room for a surprise.”

Touko was in the sticky shed. Sitting down at the black chair, looking straight ahead at the window. From here, she could see the shed she had been conducting her monitoring from. Needless to say, there was nobody observing her there.

She tried to picture a situation where nobody would bother looking at her.
Overwhelming solitude.

Overwhelming dissatisfaction.

The feelings of someone submerged by these.

She tried to conjure them.

But it obviously didn't work out. It shouldn't be a big surprise. One's imagination is limited. As such, there won't ever come a time where Touko can sympathize with Kumagai Naoto. She sat on the chair where he used to spend most of his days, just in case, but didn't get visited by any specific emotions nor came up with any unusual thoughts. She merely felt a total and complete sense of powerlessness.

In the end, have I been saved? Has my confusion settled down? Am I done separating reality from delusions? No...the answer to all of these is a given: I haven't taken a single step forward since that first day. There is no saving nor settling. And both reality and delusions were out of my grasp from the very start. After all, this is merely a part of my endlessly-continuing everyday life.

Touko put down Kumagai Naoto's Christmas present on the desk. The laptop's battery and adapter. She plugged the adapter into the computer, then connected it to an outlet. She then opened the laptop and pressed the power button. The sound of it booting up resounded in the room. She could vaguely make out her reflection on the black screen. A hazy face with an unstable silhouette. Touko instinctively closed the laptop. She then grabbed the battery and, with all her might, hurled it against the computer. *Crack*. The sound of something fissuring. She smashed it again, and again, and again, and again... She sustained her attack until the screen was cleanly split in two.

Now that the upper part was totaled, she grabbed the laptop and slammed it against the floor. Not satisfied yet, she lifted the chair above her head before swinging it down. *Ktrrrr*. A theatrical sound burst as parts and keys flung out. *Fuck you*. Touko silently moved her lips. *Nobody's gonna read your fucking stories!*

That's how the world goes on. With morons making selfish decisions and endorsing those themselves.

Epilogue

Thus, the story met its actual end. However, the text still continues below. What words can possibly exist beyond the end of the story? That is, obviously, the ‘afterword.’ However, since what follows is inarguably not an ‘afterword’ in the true sense of the word, and is more related to the actual story than most, I have taken the liberty to call this an epilogue (a part of the story).

Now, as *you* have probably already noticed with your grand wisdom, this book, *Christmas Terror*, marks the end of Satou Yuuya’s brief life as an author.

I can’t write the Kagami Saga anymore.

Since this industry isn’t so wealthy it can afford keeping around people who don’t generate money, it is exceedingly logical to get rid of third-rate authors who somehow ended up on the front lines to free the way for talented newcomers. And I cannot really defy that. As I’ve depicted many times over in my stories, weaklings must be ready for death whenever. But, of course, I don’t believe my works to be third-rate in the slightest. They might be below average on the mystery front, sure, but that doesn’t actually matter—sadly, I seem to be the only one of that mind. As Kumagai Naoto said in his speech in the story, the world keeps demanding new things, but when these actually appear, it panics and acts conservatively. I absolutely hate that. I despise every single actor of this world that bundles up completely heterogeneous authors under the magic formula ‘new wave’ they chant for their selfish piece of mind. I loathe this world for only supporting old things—things that are already commonplace. Though, of course, I’m not saying that new things are automatically better than old things. The past should be treasured as such. I’m not asking to abandon it either. I apologize in advance for having not finished anything from them, but Poe, Queen, Christie, and uhh, who is there, Ranpo? I am technically aware of what these predecessors have invented, developed, perfected, and achieved. However...I don’t see these as actual works, but as history. In short, I haven’t inherited a tradition from these people, but a formula. To get even bolder, I even consider *The Tokyo Zodiac Murders* to be

part of history. I haven't read a single entry from the House Series either. The only one of the Three Great Mysteries I've finished is *Dogra Magra*. I haven't even met Sherlock Holmes and Kindaichi Kousuke. I discovered the Kodansha Novels label with Kyougoku Natsuhiko, then learned of the Mephisto Prize through Mori Hiroshi and Seiryuin Ryuusui. Sorry, but these are my entry points and where I stand to this day.

Kumagai Naoto claimed that the fear of being rejected is greater than that of being ignored or paid no mind to, but I disagree.

Ignoring.

Indifference.

These are the two things I fear the most. All these critics acting like my works don't exist in their essays, all these book-review site admins making their reading lists as if my works don't exist, all these 'books from the region' sections overtly acting like my works don't exist. Every time I open a magazine, connect to the internet, or pass in front of a bookstore, I get overwhelmed by sadness.

And at every instance I get reminded of the distance between you and I.

Kumagai Naoto threw away his expectations for the world and chose to create stories for his own sake, but I definitely cannot walk down the same path as him. After all, I'm the type of person to coat the world with my worth. Picking away at the world or making a new one altogether seems impossible to me.

I can hear people say that if I wanted to live by relying on the world, I should have just written stories with a broader appeal. Indeed, my works are certainly removed from the mainstream (though I personally don't agree). The saga that Salinger, one of my gods of literature, created, which follows a crazy family in their deranged shenanigans—AKA the Glass Saga—on which I poured a generous layer of enamel: the Kagami Saga. That has been my only weapon. *Flicker Style*, *The Weight of an Enamel-Varnished Soul*, and *Submerged Piano* are the malformed—yet rational—creations I gave birth to while trying to piece the world together for myself. Calling them entertainment-focused wouldn't be sensible, and calling them mystery novels would earn you weird looks; they are far from what the Kodansha Novels readers want. However, I released these works into the wild anyway, believing in your strength. I thought they would land in the right hands.

And this is the result.

Were my expectations too naive? Or is the world too shitty? By now, I have no idea and can't be bothered to check—now that I have moved past one-dimensional, pure emotions such as anger, grief, and hopelessness altogether.

So...what will happen to me from now on?

I won't achieve anything, obviously—I deliver words of despair in a dreary tone.

I'm okay, I'll keep doing my best—I deliver words of hope in a cheerful tone.

However, neither of these claims had much impact on me. How can I hope to be swayed by my own words, now that I have become unable to write?

Now that we have come to the final stretch, I want to address my thanks to the people who put the label ‘author’ on the dull, 19-year-old Satou Yuuya and participated in relocating him from the countryside of Hokkaido to a proper place of society, and to the people who earnestly took on the stories the author Satou Yuuya dispersed. However, naming every single person would inevitably bring us over the page limit, so I will selfishly abbreviate that process.

Ootsuka Eiji-san, who gracefully wrote a recommendation for *Flicker Style*, is the benefactor of my life who set me onto this path with a violent kick to the back during my middle and high school days. Even though these memories have now lost all sweetness and are merely bitter, I would have never considered creating my own stories if not for that Wednesday night. Also, I cannot forget the pure joy I felt when I read Norizuki Rintarou-san’s recommendation. The single fact that Norizuki Rintarou, not even as an author or as a critic, but as a human being, wrote me a recommendation was beyond moving. The many stories composed by Kadono Kouhei-san, who bestowed *The Weight of an Enamel-Varnished Soul* with perfect, surgical words, have already permeated within me and become a part of my being. Meeting my end without getting the chance to put them into use is one of my biggest regrets. If not for Saitou Akira-san from Veia to create wonderful covers for me every single time, my works wouldn’t be any better than hysterical nonsense; I am much obliged. And without the Third Literary Publishing Department’s Oota Katsushi’s earnest guidance (I swear), I would have kicked the bucket much, much earlier. His *manly* methods of trampling on my manuscripts and his cruelty fueled by a god-awful naming sense leading him to calling me a ‘reprint virgin’ in coffee shops and on the street undoubtedly arose bloodlust in me, in the actual sense of the term, but even these have become amusing memories by now. As of the completion of this manuscript,

I won't be getting his random calls (pretexting as meetings) in the dead of the night anymore. It...feels strange.

Now,

To those named above,

And to those I couldn't mention due to page restrictions,

I am grateful from the bottom of my heart.

Thank you so much for everything.

And, I am sincerely sorry for everything.

Please, sneer at me for having to take my leave off the stage in this way.

Satou Yuuya

Translator's Addition

Interview from Katsuji Club's 2003 Winter Issue

Satou Yuuya: A strong, beautiful weakling, in a way?

A shock ran through the fervent fans of Satou Yuuya's 'broken' world after the release of *Christmas Terror*. The reason for that: in the afterword presented as an epilogue, he announced this work would mark the end of his career as an author! Stupefaction, confusion... In the mix, news stating that Satou Yuuya is moving to Tokyo?! What?!?! What in the world is happening!? We approached him to find the truth behind these mysterious moves!

But first, a comment from his editor, Oota-san!

Who is 'Satou Yuuya'?

In my opinion, he's the author who had the bleakest teenage years (laughs). It must feel insanely entrapping to spend your teens in the countryside in the 90s, right after the bubble burst. There are no jobs because of the recession and nothing else to do. Even just having dreams is a feat in itself.

When I read *Flicker Style*, I heard the author scream 'This is all I can write about!' I felt he had the potential to become the author who will save that generation's spirit. And when I actually met him and saw the town he lived in, that feeling turned into a conviction. But what good is there to talk about someone who can't write... (laughs) I mean, *Christmas Terror*'s finale is dead-serious!

Interview

In his last work, *Christmas Terror*, he exposed the solitude and anxiety inherent to writers through reality, brought up his editor (Oota-san), and vomited his inner feelings. That epilogue announcing the end of his career was so visceral for a story that it became a hot topic. The term ‘reprint virgin’ revealed in the book to be what Oota-san calls him was surprisingly well-received by some, and seems to be becoming a widespread industry slang (come on...).

In that context, we received information that Satou Yuuya-san has moved from Hokkaido to the capital. Is that a sign he will actually keep on writing?! ...So, the current Satou Yuuya-san has now been living in Tokyo for under 100 hours, freeloading at an acquaintance’s place, ready to search for an apartment and a job. Let’s have him join us right away. (Thank you for the interview!)

—To start with, obviously, let’s talk about *Christmas Terror*.

I have to say, I find it really generous from the Third Literary Publishing Department that they allowed that epilogue to run in a magazine and be published as is.

“I completely agree. Oota-san read the manuscript before my eyes and let out a sigh. ‘You know, I’ll definitely get in trouble if we publish this...’ he told me. ...Since that part was already in the initial draft.”

And yet, it got published in the end. That really shows the mutual trust between the author and the editor that was already present by that point.

But I’m really curious about how the readers reacted.

“Um... All the reactions were just as expected. People telling me to grow up and people asking if I was fine... It was so expected, in a way, it’s like nothing changed. I wanted to go out with a bang, but I guess it didn’t go down that

way... You know, almost everything up to that point was so within expectations, it wasn't even shocking... Really, if there's one thing I can say I didn't expect, it's for my books to sell this little (laughs).

"Still, at least I got confirmation that I reached the people I meant to, and that's enough to make me feel saved. I really didn't get any reactions of the sort until then, so yeah. But you still have to sell a certain amount. If you don't, you won't have a place to write. And if you can't write, you aren't an author. So you really must sell well."

For curiosity, who instilled you this outlook of gauging authors by the numbers they generate?

"...My editor (laughs)."

Isn't that simply because they see you write at the cost of your own health, so they want to produce numbers that will justify that?

"I don't know... (skeptical) I think they're just after big numbers... (grumbling) I mean, I've been thinking about this for a while. What does it even mean to sell well?

"To begin with, I'm not writing with a clear goal in mind, I just write and somehow end up with something, so maybe I should've tried harder to make them pieces of entertainment and, like, aimed at a bigger audience... Ah, but I put quite a lot of thought into how I wrote *Submerged Piano*, my third novel. But *Christmas Terror* and the short story I wrote for *Shin Genjitsu* (magazine by Kadokawa Shoten) are definitely not for entertainment, I kinda realize I put too much of myself into them and that's no good, probably (grumbling)..."

Your taciturn attitude gives off a pessimistic aura, but you are obviously trying to take a step forward.

Are you optimistic right now?

"Mhm...maybe? I might be...yeah (nodding to himself). I mean, I figured I would break down for sure if I stayed in my hometown. ...All my classmates became freeters, and only...I think just one person got an actual job. There's

barely any option for part-time jobs. And even if you find something, the pay is super low so you're left with an awful ultimatum.

"The place I lived in was quite in the countryside, even for Hokkaido standards; it's pretty horrible on the cultural front. To give you a picture, we have *Harry Potter* but no Otsuichi. Also it's common to get new books one or two months after everyone. You know, I kinda knew we were behind on that front, but didn't really know how serious that was until I came to Tokyo. When I go to a bookstore, I'm like 'Oh yeah, they are different kinds of stores.' Where I grew up you had to go to the library to read *Gunzou* (magazine by Kodansha), but somehow in Tokyo it's everywhere on release day? That's really all it comes down to.

"Also, I didn't have any friends who read novels. ...That was pretty tough too, yeah. I was half-desperate to find someone who could understand me, whom my words could get across to. But if you were to ask if that's why I started writing, the thing is, I didn't really put enough thought into it to be able to give you a straight yes...

"It's not like I aimed to be a writer as a grand plan to escape from my hometown, I simply thought of becoming one because I didn't want a normal job. I figured I could become an author and write a few things here and there from my hometown, but it wasn't that easy. And like, since I became an author with that level of motivation, I'm currently planning on going on a storing-up phase. I'll read a bunch of books and stuff... In that sense, I should've come to Tokyo way earlier. I just didn't have the nerves to.

"Still, I think I'm pretty blessed. Since, you know, there are people who can't take action even if they want to. And here I can get interviewed, too. I'm really glad I came."

Indeed, Satou-san has moved his heavy feet and is here with us.

—Of course, we're curious about your next work.

Your current author profile at Kodansha Novels reads ‘Getting into the workforce—or not,’ a single line. What is that about?

“Ah yes, that’s just what actually happened. The reason I didn’t get a job was...unclear, even to myself.”

Is that what people call a *hikikomori*?

“Part of me didn’t want to leave the house, yeah. But I’m not sure it’s exactly the same sensation as being a *hikikomori*. It’s just—when I see, like on the news, that a fight broke out at a train station and people got injured and died, I get the vague feeling, ‘Ahh, that’s scary. I don’t want to go outside.’ I’m also afraid of Tokyo with how many people there are. I came here for work before, but there were so many people I didn’t take a step outside the hotel. But I also realize I *have* to go out at some point...”

Did you maybe start writing novels because you didn’t want to leave the house?

“I started writing in middle school, but I don’t actually remember what initially pushed me to. It’s just that...I’m bad at art, can’t draw manga, and suck at sports, but I figured I could at least write... But I bet I simply had a blast doing it. Since when I wrote, I would spend all day doing just that.

“When I completed *Flicker Style* I called myself a member of society, but in reality I had barely ever worked and just wished I could make a living with novels. *Flicker Style* was the first book I ever finished. But yeah, turning 19 before finishing a single book is something...”

Are you paying attention to authors of the same generation?

“So far, I’ve only met Nisio Isin-san, and yeah I’m paying attention... Mhm, rather, I just think ‘Oh, that’s really good!’ or ‘Woah, he’s writing what I wanted to better than me!’ It’s like he’s taking what I vaguely feel and expressing them with clearer, more precise words. So I’m like, ‘Ah crap, this is so good’ (laughs).

“There are things I want to write too. If I had a place to do it. But Kodansha won’t publish me anymore (’cause I don’t sell enough).”

You're getting pretty down on yourself (laughs), but do you really not have any plans of writing for Kodansha Novels in the future, like you said in *Christmas Terror's* epilogue?

"None. That wasn't a joke. I do want to write more of the Kagami Saga for its readers, but I'm also aware the majority wouldn't accept another Kagami book.

"And like, I don't think so at all, but people say the Kagami Saga is too visceral... Also, and I kinda admit to this one, they say the characters don't really stand out. And—again, I don't disagree—that the stories are awful, and that the tricks don't work... I mean, yeah, what can I say..."

What's up with this tenacious timidity (laughs)? Where did it even come from?

—Here, the reason for the timidity (maybe?), Kodansha's Oota-san, makes a sudden appearance.

Oota: "Sorry, I planned on intervening if the interview turned detrimental for Satou-san's future."

Satou: "...Uhh, you should have come in way earlier, then..."

After waiting for their friendly (?) exchange to end, I once again cut to the chase.

So what's the actual truth behind *Christmas Terror's* epilogue?

Oota + Satou: "Nah, that's for real."

An immediate answer!? But it's actually a bit, isn't it? I mean, you moved to Tokyo, after all. You just seem to be hesitating as to what direction to take and what to write.

Oota: "Hmm, it's not for me to answer, but I really think Satou Yuuya should just write what Satou Yuuya thinks is interesting."

Like, you're waiting for him to bring you a book and shout, 'This is my work! Read it!' ...?

Satou: "I did that four times and failed every single time..."

...If they were failures, like you say, they wouldn't have been published, would they?

Oota: "And *Christmas Terror* got a reprint, too. Congrats, you lost your reprint virginity! He's just beating himself over too much. Wait, is this Satou Yuuya's Counseling Session today?"

It's not (laughs).

Oota: "You know, when I look at him, I feel like 'freeter literature' deserves to be a thing, just like how proletarian literature exists. To me, he's bearing the pain of the modern youth whose only choice in life is to become a freeter."

The editorial staff and the writer both found Oota-san's sharp remark surprisingly convincing.

Satou: "Freeter literature... I mean, true, I am one... (in complete seriousness). I have to find a part-time job, too..."

Despite telling him off for that last bit, we went on a lengthy tangent about what kind of job he would rather do... This might actually be a life-counseling session, after all.

Oota: "But here you are in Tokyo, you gotta write novels. You *have* the talent."

Suddenly, the voice of heaven (?) came out of Oota-san. He must have come today just to tell him these words.

Satou: "Can I get published in Kodansha Novels?"

Oota: "I can't guarantee anything, but I'll put my own life as an editor on the line and do everything I can! But I think my life is, like, really light (laughs). So no idea what will come out of it."

Satou: "Hmm... (still skeptical)."

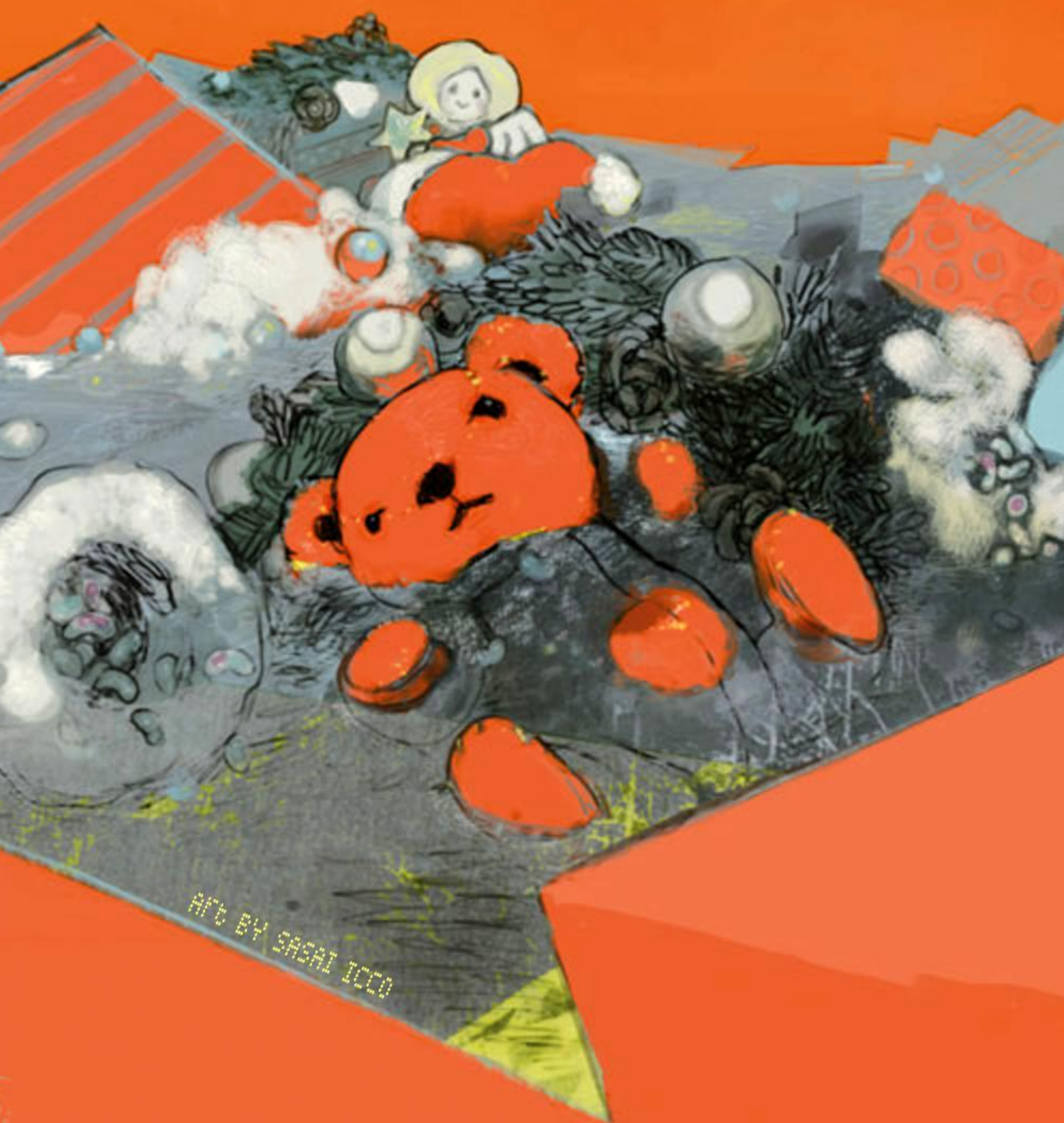
Huh, see, it actually was a bit, told you so. Now in the last stretch (?), I finished by enquiring about his ambitions and hopes.

Satou: "Er, first, I'll try to find myself a part-time job... I'm kidding. Well, no, I *will* actually search.

“Either way, I’ll keep on writing. My biggest and only ambition is to continue writing...I hope I can.”

Satou Yuuya-san was really “Going forward, except, moonwalking! (© Nisio Isin)” from start to finish.

Still, we’re looking forward to seeing your next work!



ART BY SASAKI ICCHU